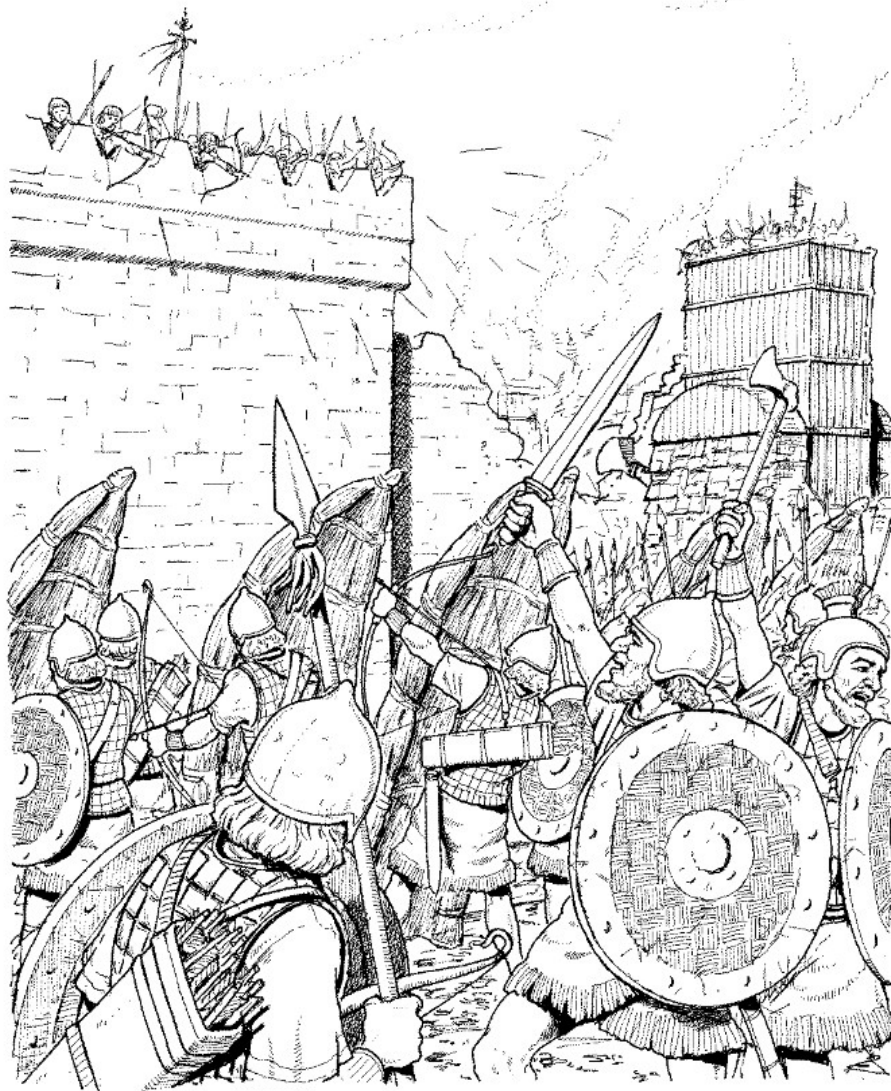




Tales from an Ancient Empire

An RPG of 80s Fantasy Cinema

by Colin D. Speirs



Tales from an Ancient Empire

An RPG of Cheesy 80s Fantasy movies

by Colin D. Speirs © 2022

dedicated to the late John Waller, Chris Hart @thegrognardfile and Alister Davison @awdscrawl

"Come to me, listen to my tale and pay me in drink and cheer, as I tell you of days long ago, of brave women and men, and of terrible ones, of magic to darken the soul, and hope to bring cheer again, of kings that were rogues and rogues that were kings"

Introduction

We live at a time when Fantasy, Science Fiction and Superhero media are reasonably mainstream and can attract serious attempts to tell compelling stories with well-written plots and characters.

In the 80s the resources available were dwarfed by the budget of this RPG, and this has nothing spent on it, nothing.

Characters are meant to be larger than life, badly outfitted by a wardrobe department doing the best it could, not so special effects and set out against impossible odds,

So, with paper, dice and imagination, it is time to strap on a sword, leave the armour at home and ride to adventure!

The system, how the game works

Characters might want to try to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but even heroes have limitations. The characters say what they want to do, the GM figures out how difficult it is and assigns that a number from

- 1 (easy) to
- 6 (impossibly hard)

The character rolls 1 Six sided dice for each point of an appropriate Attribute and an extra die for an appropriate Specialisation.

The character hopes to equal to exceed the difficulty by getting enough dice that are successes, a 4 or more on the six sided die is a success. Some circumstances can change that success range, e.g a curse could make a success a 5+ rather than a 4+.

When the character is trying to succeed despite someone else, both roll and the one with the most successes, wins. If both roll the same number of successes, if plausible, the one trying to achieve their goal succeeds, but there is a complication.

E.g. Philomena of Ehlios is sneaking past a guard. She has 3 dice to roll, the Guard has 1. Philomena and the guard both get 1 success. She has snuck past the guard, but another patrol is coming into view.

Creating a Character

Attributes

Characters have four attributes that define their core abilities and chance to succeed at anything they try Force Skill in using tools and techniques that require a bit of force.

Deftness Manual dexterity, the ability to get out of harm's way or perform acrobatic feats.

Presence Being attuned to the world and others, also the ability to use that attunement to influence or understand.

Knowledge Understanding the mechanisms of the world, and knowing esoteric secrets long hidden.

You have six points to distribute between the attributes, you can give a character zero points in an attribute, but no attribute can be above three at the start.

If characters are damaged they temporarily lose points from an attribute. If an attribute is reduced below 0, the character is knocked out.

Starting equipment

The character has 3d6 silver, one weapon, one of

- a second weapon
- adequate armour
- A book of secrets
- Tools of a trade

Specialisations

The character now has four Specialisation Points, a Specialisation costs one, two or three of those points, these build on the Attributes to increase their chance. A Specialisation can be bought more than once

Force Specialisations

Feats of Strength

Breaking doors down, throwing guards off walls, bending prison bars, lifting heavy weights etc

Hand weapons

Swords, daggers, spears in one hand, clubs, joint of beef, they're all the same aren't they?

Strong Defence

For parrying or blocking with a shield, beat an attacker with this and you might knock your enemy down

Two-handed weapons

Using bigger, heavier or longer weapons in both hand

Deftness Specialisations

Archery

Expertise with bows, crossbows and, inexplicably slings

Quick Response

Getting out of the way of nasty objects by dodging or acrobatic rolls, if very successful this can put you at an advantage against your foe

Sleight of Hand

Any skill using legerdemain or manual dexterity, such as lock picking, cheating with cards, juggling, fixing or deactivating machinery

Stealth

Sneaking about, being silent, hiding in shadows etc

Thrown weapons

Chucking any small thing, rocks, knives, darts, books etc with some accuracy

Tumbling

Feats of acrobatics, climbing, tight-rope walking or any other gymnastic spectacle

Presence Specialisations

Discover

Spotting hidden things, following a trail, researching information or any other making sense out of a pattern

Friendship to Animals (2 points)

You have an empathic link with animals and are able to persuade them to help you, though you should help them in return. They will not sacrifice themselves for you unless you have built up a strong bond.

Luck (3 points)

For each point of Luck, roll 1 of the dice in a test in a different colour, if that die is a 6, then you get to roll another die to possibly add to your successes.

Thaumaturgy (2 points)

Invoking the power of a deity or spirits for benefit or ill

Staging

Acting, playing an instrument, reciting poetry but also impersonation and imitating

Sway

Using charm, intimidation, bargaining or the like to get your way with people, spirits, animals whatever

Knowledge Specialisations

Arcane Secrets

Having information about the fantastic, the magical, the divine, the infernal and the otherworldly

Mundane knowledge

Knowing about the everyday, history, culture, power structures and trade of the world

Outdoors mastery

Finding your way about, finding food, surviving and thriving in the wilderness, knowing a thing or two about animals

Sorcery (2 points)

The art of magic, usable for evil or good

Talent Specialisations

These are not tied to any Attribute, but are other features of the character which can only be bought once

Earthfolk (2 points)

The character feels comfortable underground and working with stone and metal. They gain 1 extra die for Outdoors Mastery underground or Knowledge involving underground environments, metalwork, and stonework. They can see in gloom as easily as most see in daylight,

Woodfolk (3 points)

The character grew up at home with the spirits and creatures of the wood. They gain 1 extra die for Outdoors Mastery in the forests, Archery and Knowledge of Woodcrafting or Arcane Secrets. They can see in gloom as easily as most see in daylight,

Mountainfolk (3 points)

Not quite as tall as a mountain, but the mountain life has caused them to grow big and strong. They gain 1 die when using Outdoor Mastery for mountains, Two-handed weapons and Feats of Strength

Using Attributes and Specialisations

As outlined in the the system section earlier, the characters' chances of achieving anything is measured by how many successes they need on a number of D6, that number being set by the GM when they have heard what the character is trying to achieve.

Instead of using opposed rolls, as in the example, the GM could decide to use the Attribute _ Specialisation, in this case the guard's Presence of 1, as the target number. If the guard had also had Discover, then that would have made the target 2.

If using these target rolls then an exact roll on target is a "*succeed with complications*".

Helping others

If appropriate, one character can help another, but adding either the Attribute *or* their Specialisation as appropriate, this includes two or more attacking a single defender on combat.

Fighting for fun and profit

Fighting is another form of skill use and, like other skills, you can use opposed rolls or a target number,

especially when low grade non-player characters like guards or bandits are the opposition.

Combat should not be a slog, it should be fast and furious, with player characters able to endure some damage, but being able to knock foes down as they swing across ropes, leap chasms and get to the heart of the castle.

Combat is split into rounds. At the start of combat each character rolls 2d6 and adds their Deftness. The higher numbers go first. Each character can move a plausible amount and attack.

If an attack succeeds against a character then damage is taken against Force or Deftness. One point for succeeding in the attack, plus one point for every success over the opponent.

The complication for equalling your opponent is to also take a point of damage yourself. If the weapon you are using is Medium or Big then you add the extra damage they do to yourself though armour still protects you.

Hits are not necessarily contacting with the business end of the weapon, it might be that you have knocked the opponent's weapon aside and kicked them out of the way, or rammed a pommel or haft to the side of their head.

Weapons

Melee weapons are

- Improvised
- Small
- Medium
- Big
- Hefty

Improvised weapons are stools, joints of beef, belaying pins or the like

Small weapons are daggers, blackjacks, billy clubs, shortwords, small hand axes and the like. A thrown weapon counts as small.

Medium weapons are battle axes, one handed swords, a spear in one hand, a mace or the like. Arrows from shortbows count as medium.

Big are two handed weapons, crossbow bolts and arrows from longbows.

Hefty weapons are too big to be used by a single person unless an Ogre or Giant, but describes something like a bench or block of stone or wagon hurled or rolled by two or more attackers. They could be used against one person, but are best used against groups.

Damage done

The weapons, or object used as a weapon do the damage done due to the Success roll. However weapons may do extra damage.

- An improvised or small weapon just does the standard damage.
- A medium weapon does 1 extra damage.
- A Big weapon does 2 more damage.
- A Hefty weapon does 3 more damage against 1 opponent, 2 more against 2, 1 more against 3 and normal against 4 to 6, after 6 they are interrupted but unharmed.

Strong Defence and Quick Response

A straight success with this negates one point of damage from an attack. Beating an attack with these skills means that the defender can

- Strong Defence - knock the attacker off balance, their next attack is at 1 die less, minus 1 die for each extra success of the Defender to a minimum of 1.
- Quick Response - The Defender has a choice, either they get a free attack, with the Attacker getting to defend as normal, or they have slipped behind their Attacker and their Attacker's next defence is at 1 die less, minus 1 die for each extra success of the Defender to a minimum of 1.

Thrown weapons and Archery can only be defended with using Deftness/Quick Response.

Reckless Attack

The attacker ignores defence, they cannot defend if attacked, and add their Strong Defence *or* Quick Response to their attack.

Desperate Defence

The defender cannot attack as they are concentrating on keeping opponents away, they add a melee weapon Specialisation to their defence.

Armour

Most player and non-player characters wear either no armour or inadequate armour that affords no protection.

A shield or "believable armour" gives 1 point of protection

Impressive armour gives 2 points of protection, but reduces use of a Deftness attempt by 1.

Getting grunts out of the way

Most low level NPCs do not use the same endurance rules as player characters or more important NPCs, they can take 1 or 2 points of damage. They are not killed, they are knocked down, shoved out of the way, have embarrassing things happen to them and are hors de combat now, but might come back into the fray later, eager for revenge.

Mayhem and Movement

Characters can try acrobatic attacks such as swinging into someone on a rope or sliding down a scree slope with sword extended. In these cases use Deftness and Tumbling for a success change.

Situations

Attacking from behind, or from shadows or the like should give the attacked an extra die. Being stuck in quicksand or with one hand tied to a leg should subtract a die from an attack or defence.

Multiple attacks

A character with more than one point of Specialisation in an attack skill can split their dice into multiple attacks.

E.g. Falcon the Slicer has Force 2 and Hand weapons 2. They can use 4 dice in 1 attack, or have 2 attacks with either 3 and 1, 2 and 2 or 3 attacks with 2 and 1 and 1 or 4 with 1 each, as they choose.



Thaumaturgy and Sorcery

Anyone can call upon gods or spirits, Thaumaturges train to grab their attention. Sorcerers bend reality to their will, usually using power either gained from long serious study or taking a short cut and signing up to a Demon Patron.

Both work the same way, the Thaumaturge/Sorcerer declares what invocation/spell they wish to use, they see how many successes are needed to cast it. An invocation or spell might take a while to cast *e.g, in combat Kurru-han the Sorcerer needs 5 successes for a spell, but only has Knowledge plus Sorcery of 4 dice. Kurru-han will need at least two rounds to cast the spell.*

Rolling to cast is the caster's action for the combat, and they can save up the successes from round to round until they get enough, or even more for an increased effect, but if they ever have more failures than successes then the invocation or spell fails.

Complications for Thaumaturges and Sorcerers for only equalling their Success chance are them starting to attract attention of otherworldly creatures or, even worse, sword swinging heroes. Eventually enough attention will be gained that something happens.

Resisting Invocations and Spells

If using opposed rolls, the Invocations are resisted with Presence (adding Thaumaturgy if you have it) and Spells are resisted with Knowledge (adding Sorcery). Targets always get 1 die to roll to resist, adding their actual Presence, so that even 0 Presence characters have a chance to resist.

To resist, the target rolls their resistance, Thaumaturge or Sorcerer rolls their Attribute + Specialisation again, and if the target beats the caster then they have resisted.

Improving chances of success

As well as using a Thaumaturgical Invocation, chances of success can be improved with meditation and sacrifice.

A Sorcerer can reproduce the effects of a Bless Invocation by shedding two points of damage as they sacrifice blood for power.

A Thaumaturge can spend an hour in meditation, or three rounds in combat, to reproduce the Bless effect.

Thaumaturgic Invocations

Animate Dead - 5 Successes

The Thaumaturge commands a spirit to animate a corpse to fight for them. The dead thing has FORCE 2 and DEFTNESS 1. Each extra success allows the Thaumaturge to add 1 to one of those Attributes.

Bless - 4 Successes

The target's success range is 3+ for 1 action or, if in combat 1 round. Add 1 action or 1 round for each success over 4.

Commanding Spirit - (2 + PRESCENCE of the Target) Successes

The target of this invocation is frozen on the spot for 1 round, plus one more for every extra success.

Curse - (3 + PRESCENCE of the Target) Successes

The target's success range is 5+ for 1 action or, if in combat 1 round. Add 1 action or 1 round for each success over 4.

Empower weapon - 3 Successes

The weapon this power is granted to is able to deal full damage to undead and creatures from another plane. Usually weapons do 1 less damage.

Instill Fear - 6 Successes

The Thaumaturge opens up the deepest, darkest fears of the target. This is an attack on the Presence of the target. If any damage is taken the character is struck with fear and may run away, or freeze or do something amusing. If Presence reaches 0 the character loses consciousness.

Heal - 3 Successes

The target gets 1 point of damage to any Attribute healed, +1 point for each extra Success.

See True - 3 Successes

This allows the Thaumaturge to add their Thaumaturgy Specialisation to any attempt to DISCOVER something.

Strike Foe - 4 Successes

This invocation causes does damage as a small weapon against the PRESCENCE of a foe.

Visions of Bobbins - 4 Successes

The target sees the spinning yarns of Fates weaving history and hears the chatter of the loom, confusing and stunning them, leaving them incapable of doing anything except defend themselves at 1 die less for 1 combat round plus 1 extra per extra success.

Sorcerous Spells

Assume Form - 6 Successes

The Sorcerer can assume the shape and voice of someone other than themselves, though this form can be revealed by use of a Scrying Stone.

Rend the heart - (5 + FORCE of the Target) Successes

The Sorcerer uses their Telekinetic powers to rip the heart from the target. Upon success of the spell, the target must roll Force (+ Feats of Strength) vs the Sorcerer's Knowledge + Sorcery. If they succeed then the spell has had no effect.

Each round this is cast, the target must roll FORCE. As long as they get 1 success they can act, otherwise they are wracked in pain.

Scrying stone - 8 Successes

This Sorcerer concentrates on a stone and sends their spirit forth. As they do so their body is unprotected and they can send the spirit up to 10 miles away each hour, + 10 miles an hour for each extra success.

Each hour the Sorcerer is scrying they take 1 point of damage. The Sorcerer needs 4 Successes vs Knowledge + Sorcery to return to their body, which is instantaneous. The Sorcerer is unaware of anything happening near their body whilst they are away from it. If they fail to return or take too much damage then the Sorcerer is unconscious for 12 hours.

Starburst - 5 Successes

This spell casts a bolt of sparking light at a foe. It does damage to the target as a big weapon and anyone else within 2 yards takes damage as if from a small weapon.

Spark bolt - 2 Successes

This spell casts a bolt of sparking light at a foe. It does damage as a small weapon

Telekinetic Grasp - Successes vary

With this the Sorcerer can lift an object up to 10 metres away. It costs

- 2 Successes for a small object
- 3 successes for a medium object
- 5 successes for a big object
- 8 for a hefty object

Small/medium/big are defined as equivalent to weapon sizes, Hefty is something like a bench or table. The Thamaturge can move this up to 15 metres away in a combat round. For each extra Success they can use the object for an extra round or move it an extra 5 metres. If

used as a weapon, the Sorcerer uses Knowledge instead of Forcplus the weapon Specialisation.

Things to buy

The standard coin of the civilised lands is the silver thaler. There are smaller coins of copper or cut silver, but most that the heroes will want will be exchanged in silver

Item Price (silver)

Small hand weapon 4

Medium hand weapon 7

Two handed weapon 10

Inadequate armour 2 - 6

Adequate Armour 8 - 12

Impressive Armour 12 - 20

Horse 12

1 week's food and drink 1

1 week's decent accommodation 2

Artefacts of Renown

The Clawsword

A single handed sword made in far Ehlios for their kings, this seems like a simple well made sword, it's pommel a simple orb, but the long, straight quillions end in a claw like tip. It has the following properties

- It does damage as a big weapon
- The quillions can be fired at range, doing damage as a small weapon.

Cromwius's scepter

A short, plain, unadorned rod of steel carried by the tyrant Cromwius as a symbol of authority. As is, it is a small weapon, however, at a twist, it springs open to reveal a double headed spear that could be wielded in one or two hands, giving the wielder the next attack against a foe even if usually they would be last.

If the wielder takes a wound then the next attack will cause an extra wound if it his, as the scepterfeeds of the blood with electric sparks.

The crossbow of Randolf

This is a small repeating crossbow that is held in one hand. It can fire two shots per attack, the first at normal chance as a medium weapon, the second at 2 dice less chance than the first as a small weapon.

Crullyn's Star

Made in the form of a five armed star about two handspans across, this thrown weapon can attack multiple foes, It attacks the first at the normal attack chance. For every successful attack, it can attack another foe at 1 die

less. As long as it has succeeded in attacking one target it will come back to the hand of the wielder after use. It does damage as a medium weapon.

The Sword of Falcon

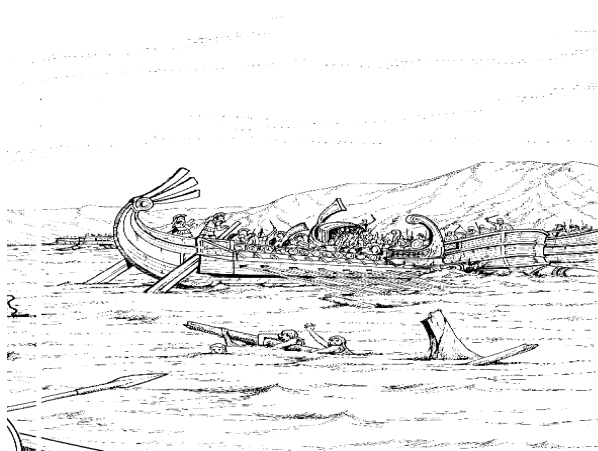
This long sword, with a pommel shaped like a falcon's head, it's beak grasping a glowing stone. It will only bond with one pure of heart and purpose. This sword can be wielded in one or two hands using either hand weapon or two handed specialisation. It has the magical properties of

- Adding 1 die to either Attack or Defence (Strong Defence or Quick Response)
- It will come to its owner when called.

The Sword of Riddles

Forged with songs and spells sung by the smith, ones that strengthened the steels with strange kennings and puzzles, this sword has charms on it never to fail the one who wields it. It has the properties of

- The character can, in a combat round, reroll one unsuccessful die in either attack or defence
- If the attack has three successes more than needed, then the opponent's weapon or armour (if Adequate) has broken



The world of the Ancient Empire

The gameworld should be larger and life and making sense should not be a priority. Populous cities in deserts with no irrigation, trade routes or crops as a reason to exist, a mixture of styles and eras, Roman gladius fighting Jacobean Rapier, slight armour on one shoulder seen as a viable form of defence.

What it should have are bandits to defeat, tyrants to thwart, treasures to steal, evil Sorcerers to vanquish and opportunities to become pirates, mercenaries, thieves, generals, heroes or fugitives from session to session.

A Sample adventure idea

For many decades, Ehlios has been at peace. A succession of just monarchs have ensured stability and prosperity, they have curbed the excesses of rapacious nobles and chiefs, and the nation has never seemed healthier or stronger.

On the frontier with the kingdom of Agirron, ruled by the brilliant, energetic but rapacious Taedor Crumwius, it is less settled. Crumwius had been fomenting dissent amongst the Barons of the Agirron Marches, and the Barons are revolting (*some would say no change there*). However, few of them would exchange the rule of Ehlios for the iron grip of Agirron, and they seek to be monarchs in their own right.

Scene one

The village of Imshur, in the barony of Vastrana, has been under attack by bandits and, whilst they have weapons and some training, the **Spahbanah** (Baroness) Pashiana of Vastrana is ill, having been poisoned, and no help is coming from there. The villagers seek mercenaries to help drive the bandits off, follow them back to their stronghold and defeat their leaders.

However the bandits, in reality, are soldiers of the **Spahban** Xathrantes, the ruler of the neighbouring barony of Graecana. The only way to defeat the bandits is to stop Xathrantes.

Scene two

The bandit camp. The camp will be in Turmoil, a small village in the hills near Imshur. If the bandit were driven off then there is the opportunity to sneak in, in disguise amongst all the confusion, or the heroes could hack their way in. In the quarters of the bandit chiefs, in reality Captain Brynlarias and his lieutenants, are documents and orders linking them to Xathrantes (despite instructions to destroy them).

Scene three

The capital of Graecana, Graekopolis, high on a rocky crag, is dominated by the citadel of Xathrantes, on a rock atop of the city rock. The heroes could try scaling the walls, infiltrating the citadel by stealth or coming up through the caves and tunnels in the rock. If doing that, the tunnels go through the catacombs of Xathrantes's ancestors.

There they can find Xathranres, unconscious, a prisoner. His place has been taken by an arisen ancestor, a Sorceror called Makaleon, who wishes to recreate the Empire that was once theirs, and has assumed his descendant's form.

Xathranres will aid the characters try to defeat Malaleon. If they do so, he may try to imprison the heroes, as Xathranres is not at all averse to the plan of having an Empire.

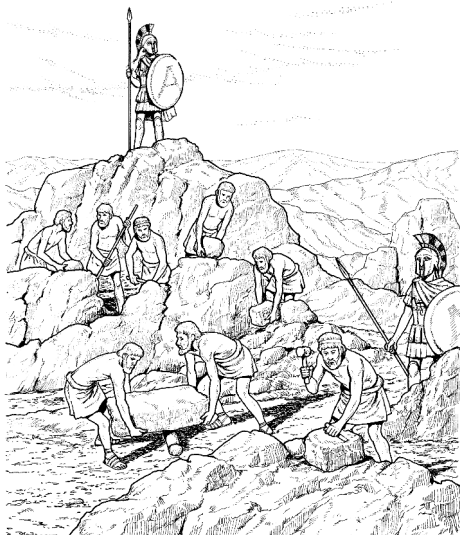
If they don't encounter Xathranres, then Makaleon the sorcerer might be a surprise.

Denouement

If Makaleon is defeated and they do not fall into the clutches of Xathranres (*if they do, there is another escape to arrange*) then they can ride to Imshur, give them the news that the attacks will cease for now, but the threat may not be gone.

Alternative quests

The heroes might instead try to help Spahbana Pashiana, finding an antidote to the poison or some wise sages who can effect a cure, and, after several adventurous episodes, return her to health and riding along side her to Imshur as she leads her army to head off the attack from Graecana.



Character Development

Characters can gain Attributes and Specialisation . At the end of an adventure or, for a long adventure, after a suitable moment, the characters should each get a Specialisation Point. If there has been good characterisation or heroics, a character can be awarded an extra point.

Specialisation points can be spent, to buy new Specialisations or buy again ones you have already to increase your chance. The points can be saved, to buy more expensive Specialisations or to increase an Attribute. It costs 10 Specialisation points to increase an Attribute.

Healing

Apart from magical healing in a combat situation, heroes heal 1 point of Damage for each hour of rest. They have the constitutions of oxen, occasionally the wits too.

Encountered People and Creatures

F = Force D = Deftness

P = Prescence K - Knowledge

A few samples to get a Gamesmaster started. To create tougher, more capable versions

Bog Standard Guard

F 2 D 1 P 0 K 0

Hand Weapons 1

Strong Defence 1

Inadequate Armour

Guard Sergeant

F 2 D 2 P 1 K 0

Hand Weapons 2

Strong Defence 1

Inadequate Armour

Restless Dead

F 1 D 0 P 0 K 0

Hand Weapons 2

Strong Defence 0

Inadequate Armour

Undead - *It takes two points of Damage to cause one point of Damage to an Undead unless the attack is made using an enchanted weapon.*

Ghost

F 0 D 2 P 3 K 1

Fear 4

Quick Response 2

Inadequate Armour

Immaterial - *Can only be damaged by enchanted weapons. It takes two points of Damage to cause one point of Damage to an Undead unless the attack is made using an enchanted weapon. The FEAR attack is against PRESCENCE.*

Giant

F3 D1 P1 K0

Two handed weapons 2

Strong Defence 1

Feats of Strength 2

Skin counts as Adequate Armour

Uses a club that counts as a Hefty weapon

War Dog

F3 D2 P1 K0

Bite and Claws count as Medium Weapons

Quick Response 2

Inadequate Armour

Living Statue

F3 D0 P1 K0

Hand Weapons 2

Strong Defence 2

Feats of Strength 1

Skin counts as Impressive Armour

Uses a moulded on mace that counts as a Big weapon

Hunter

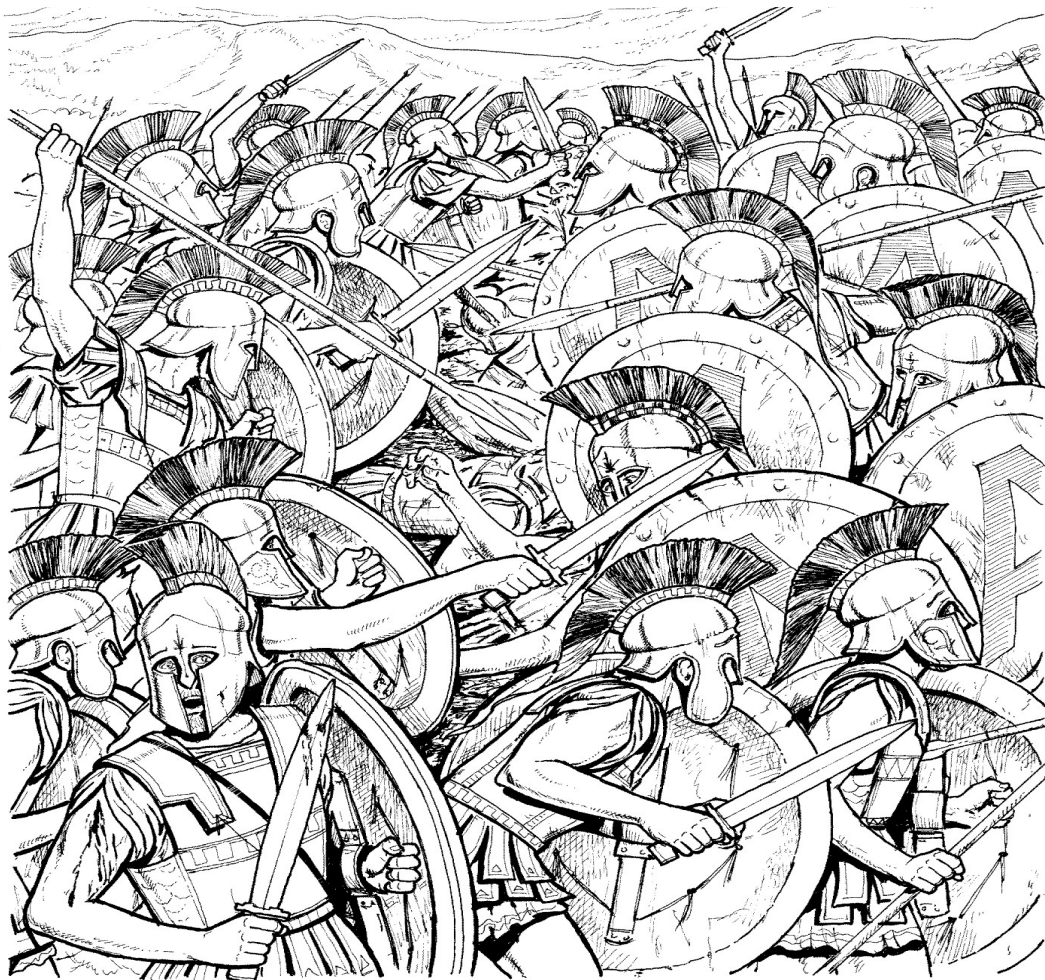
F1 D2 P2 K1

Quick Response 2

Archery 2

Outdoors Mastery 1

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Tales of an Ancient Empire

A role-playing game of 80s movie action

"Know, o prince, that between the ye..." - No

"A long time ago in..." - Hell no!

"In a hole in the ground there..." - Wrong feel

"A beginning is a very delicate time. Kn..." - What is *wrong* with me?

OK, here goes

"Gentlefolk, your eyes are keen, your ears miss nothing, your wits are sharp, lend your senses to our play.

Brave peasants and humble knights will face long forgotten challenges arisen from death.

Tyrants and heroes will band together against a greater evil, but can betrayal be far behind.

Beautiful cities and riches unknown await you, follow us..."

