

Lamentations of the Flame Princess – Ottoman Empire (phase 2)

I am contracted to produce a book of setting information and adventures

I am now playtesting the altered game mechanics and character/setting concepts.

- Player-characters: the in-game terms like “class” are now explicitly divorced from the characters’ actual roles and interests in society.
- The magic system: I’ve re-developed and re-purposed the spells and details of the mechanics to suit the setting.
- The setting: the publisher really wants the culture to become normal for the players, rather than exotic, and for horror and oddness to violate the normality.

The game system



Lamentations of the Flame Princess is a modified and focused version of *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set 3rd* edition (1985, by Frank Mentzer). It is aimed solely at “weird fantasy” defined as moody and splatter horror, surrealism, and a bleak world-view, set in the year 1630. Magic is a dreadful intrusion, not a fun technology.

Play produces grim novellas or films rather than long multi-volume epics. You’re in a bad situation. Player-characters are likely to die or to be horribly maimed, among other things.

Everyone is human. There are no fantasy races like elves and no magical realms or locations. Armor and weapons, including gunpowder, are strictly from the historical period.

The system treats all other characters as 0-level, regardless of competence, abilities, or social rank. So this isn’t a setting with 4th level magic users and 10th level fighters all over the place.

A core concept is that the player-characters are not socially functional people. Exploring lawless areas, finding unclaimed or disputed treasure for yourself, and solving problems violently are not acceptable behavior, and you are all doing it mainly because you *can’t* get along as an ordinary soldier, cleric, or scholar.

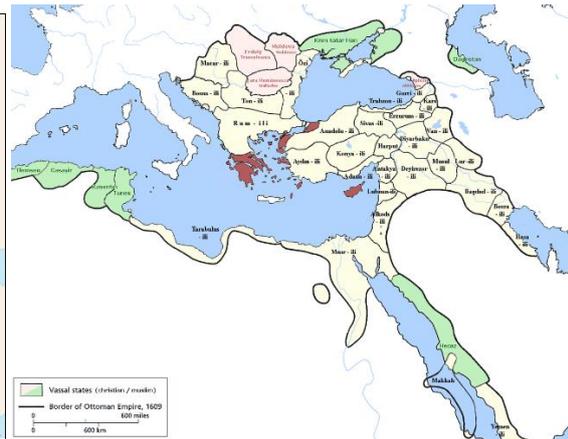
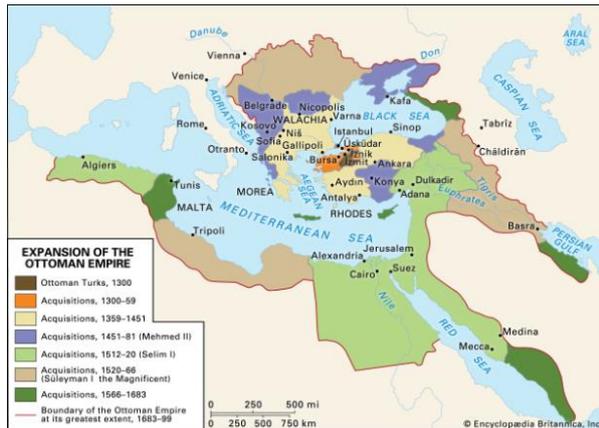
Alignment is both unique and important – because it has nothing to do with player-characters’ opinions. You play your character’s opinions exactly as you please at all times, and as consistently or variably as you want. Alignment is instead about how reality looks at *you*.

- Neutral: this is normal. As far as the universe is concerned, you are ordinary.
- Lawful: reality itself has determined a destiny for you, good or bad, and places opportunities and tests in your path. Clerics must be Lawful.
- Chaotic: you draw otherworldly and anti-matter forces toward you, without knowing or wanting to. Magic Users must be Chaotic.

Religion

By some definitions, the resulting product will be “Islamic,” in the sense that the 17th century Sunni Orthodox values and religious authorities of the time are central to the experience of play. At that time these were extremely boring and administrative, with almost no theology or interesting policy questions. However, society includes very broad diversity of religions and diversity of outlooks, throughout the empire. For example, Sufism was generally accepted and represented an incredible range of beliefs and practices, some of them bizarre. Playing a Sufi would allow a player-character plenty of range for unorthodox views. Eyalets with majority Christian populations typically used non-Islamic legal procedures and behavioral standards. Most of these were Orthodox Catholic Communion but some diverse and odd minority Christians could be found, especially from Syria and nearby areas.

The setting



Play is set anywhere among the holdings of the Ottoman Empire in 1630. The empire is divided into administrative *eyalets* and governed by the *millet* system, allowing for a great deal of cultural and religious autonomy, but centralized military and economic authority from the capitol, Constantinopolis (not “Istanbul,” which is a 20th century name.)

The Sultan is Murad IV, a young man with little authority; the top governance is divided (in descending order) among Kösem Sultan (a Greek woman, his mother), the Kizla Agha (“Chief Black Eunuch”), and the Grand Vizier, Gazi Hüsrev Pasha (a Bosnian). Conflict with western regions is less intense than later historians would like to admit. Europe is torn apart by the Thirty Years War, and the Habsburg rulers have secured a formal peace with Constantinople in 1629. External conflict for the Empire mainly concerns the Persian Safavids and the governance of Baghdad. Internally the Empire’s biggest problem is the Janissary class, who frequently rebel and attempt coups.

Anatolia (Turkey) is in low-level rebellion and doesn’t constitute the primary state for the Empire, Arabia proper is a boring backwater, Jerusalem and nearby areas are even more so, and most of the governing class of Constantinopolis comes from the Caucasus and the combined culture of southern Turkey and Greece.

Although the period’s central governance is very interesting, it will enter play only as an influence from afar. By definition, our locations must be less-controlled, lawless areas, but sometimes in a very orderly place which is struck by horrific and unwanted forces. I’m choosing to develop regions which correspond to today’s flashpoints of war and other crisis: Baghdad (occupied/taken by the Safavids), Gaza, the Crimean Peninsula, north/south Sudan, Yemen (recently lost to Zaid), and others.

Player procedure



Roll characteristics, choose class: Fighter, Cleric, Magic-User, Specialist.

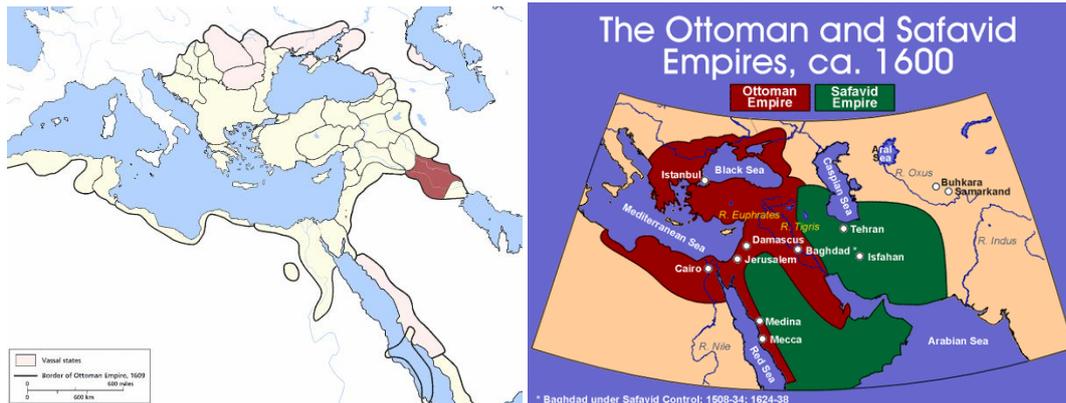
Choose cultural identity:

- Region of origin (*eyalet*)
- Social rank/profession
- Faith: the establishmentarian creed is Sunni Orthodox (Hanafi school of law; Maturidi tradition), which is extremely rational and boring; many *eyalets* are characterized by local religion instead, including many forms of Christianity. Sufi sects offer a legal alternative for eclectic and often strange beliefs and practices.

Choose alignment: Neutral, Law, Chaos – note that these are not philosophical positions. Your character does not know his or her alignment. Get equipment suitable to your profession. Arms and armor restrictions are very permissive compared to the initial D&D source. Firearms and bows are sophisticated and more effective than contemporary European versions.

Magic-Users begin with Read Magic and three other spells determined randomly (roll d20 three times). Spellcasting includes much writing and symbolic activity. Clerics choose any of the first-level prayers they want. Prayers are not “cast,” but activate when the cleric desires, or “realizes that this was the time.”

OCCUPIED BAGHDAD



This once-great center of commerce and culture is now a wretched, war-torn border region, for a hundred years of imperial conflict. It will soon return to Ottoman control, but will not recover for another two centuries. Right now, it is occupied and controlled by the Safavid imperials (Persia), whose supreme ruler is Shah Abbas.

This is why the Grand Vizier position is so uncertain and variable, in combination with the rebellion in Erzurum (Anatolia).

- In 1621-1624, the Janissary Bakr was refused the pasha seat in the Baghdad region, then switched allegiance to Shah Abbas, then switched back, and in the ensuing confusion, the Safavid armies seized Baghdad and control of the eastern imperial border.
- 1625: the Grand Vizier, Hafiz Ahmed Pasha, led Ottoman forces to retake Baghdad, beginning with a successful siege but ultimately cut off from supply lines and unable to maintain it, defeated and withdrawn to Mosul in 1626 – a disaster which cost Ahmed Pasha his position.
- 1626-1629: the next Grand Vizier, Damat Halil Pasha, focuses on the rebellion in Erzurum and fails to quell it, and loses his position thereby.

During our period of play: in spring of 1630, the next Grand Vizier, Gazi Hüsrev Pasha, crushes the rebellion in Erzurum, then leads forces into Mesopotamia, but wet weather leads him to strike directly into Persia, defeating forces and sacking the city of Hamadan in May. He establishes a siege of Baghdad in November, but winter weather breaks the lines of communication and he withdraws.

Baghdad itself is a wreck: depopulated by immediate war but especially by recurrent plague, retaining the semblance of customs without the rule of law, subject to military whims and policy, in and out of siege. Non-Muslims and presumably non-Shia are subject to harsh discrimination at best, and often massacre. It is a hotbed of gangs, garrisons, imported administrators whom no one is listening to, Shia clerics eager to control its mosques and archives, get-rich-quick schemes, looters and smugglers, and badly-controlled troops.

Later (after the time of play): Hüsrev Pasha will be dismissed from office in 1631 and semi-exiled to a far province. He is succeeded by Ahmed Pasha (the guy from 1625) who is then killed in a Jannissary rebellion/coup; soon afterward, Hüsrev Pasha is assassinated by imperial agents.

THE SEA OF AZOV



This is a border region among the eyalets of Silistra and Childir, the Crimean Khanate (an Ottoman vassal state), and Russia. What matters is who gets to haul what kind of resources to which destination, and that means shady contracts and betrayals among local powers, as well as blatant maritime piracy.



One modern controversy concerns the slave trade of Polish-Lithuanian women to the Ottoman government. The scholarship is completely split over how bad this was or whether it even happened.

We will quickly make up characters and put them on a ship in the most interesting situation we can think of. Choose a character class (Fighter, Magic User, Cleric, Specialist), a region of origin, a plausible religious upbringing or identity, and equipment suited to a somewhat-outlaw-type person on a seagoing vessel in a violent place. We will determine a useful social and political context from there.

