



LIFE IN TALDOR

“Ho, upon the Lion Throne sits the personification of glory! For from his lofty seat rules the grand prince of Taldor—the bastion of civilization, jewel of sophistication, heart of culture, soul of humanity. Who but the grand prince, Emperor of Emperors, could rule such a land; command such armies that drove the Whispering Tyrant into his final grave; spread the light of Oppara to the far, dark corners of the continent? None but Stavian! We of Taldor do not deserve you. May you ever bless our fields so that we may sow a bounty worthy of your table. May you ever reign with the wisdom of justice and efficiency. May you ever remain our protector, our emperor, our grand prince.”

—Kirdan Olphexis,
three days before his elevation to the title of visbaronet

Taldor was among the first nations to climb out of the devastation of Earthfall during the Age of Destiny, and it has made an indelible mark on the history and culture of the Inner Sea region since its earliest days. Throughout the millennia, much has changed, but the core of Taldor's national identity has remained consistent. Pride swells the heart of every Taldan citizen, from the grand prince down to the most destitute of paupers, knowing that they alone are the progenitors of the culture, the language, and the very existence of Avistani civilization.

Taldor is Avistan.

The nation and its people are steeped in tradition, marking both their greatest strengths and their gravest failings. For every victory and innovation Taldor claims, two overblown legends or useless complexities from the past follow. Taldan culture overflows with a false sense of entitlement and the burden of destiny. With each new generation, trends in fashion, government, and general worldview shift, but each leaves artifacts that persist for 10 generations more, mutating and stagnating in equal measure—echoes of the past inspiring, obstructing, and shaping the present day. These legacies may take the form of archaic laws that are erratically enforced, noble titles that carry no true power or authority, or ancient institutions—the need for them centuries gone—grasping for relevance in the modern day. Taldor is propelled forward by inertia and sheer stubbornness as much as it is by genuine power.

Extreme stratification of power and wealth has persisted in Taldor for as long as history records, extending from an age when farmers and laborers were merely tenants on their respective city-states' lands. The aristocracy, though only a small minority of the population, controls an inordinate amount of wealth and influence, and the gap between the lowest noble and the most influential commoner is wider than in any other Inner Sea nation. While many scholars see such stratification as the recipe for revolution, Taldor's government and society remain surprisingly stable, thanks to large-scale civic engineering and social projects that ensure a relatively high standard of living for all citizens—even the poorest farmers know they have access to clean water, well-built roads, and grain in times of famine.

National pride further cements Taldor's legendary stability. The nobility believe themselves to still rule over an empire at the height of influence, while the lower classes hold on to the hope of someday being elevated to the aristocracy. The First Emperor was himself a commoner who earned nobility through determination and military service—a myth that trickles through the common ranks, promoting hard work and stoicism as the path to social advancement and wealth. The aristocracy, in the average Taldan's mind, must be hardworking and

moral people because they reap extraordinary rewards, and so those excesses must be well deserved.

Pragmatism, baked into the fabric of Taldan society over the millennia, also serves to keep the nation moving forward despite the glaring inequalities that plague its populace. A farmer who has no hope of ever earning a noble title, owning his own land, or having a day that didn't involve manual labor can find comfort in knowing that the countryside will remain largely safe from both bandits and monsters, that the people will still be fed in times of drought and famine, and that an invading army would be repulsed long before it reached the nation's heart. As long as the status quo is one of peace and relative prosperity, even the most downtrodden Taldans hesitate to upset the applecart and buck the system. The endless revolution and violence in neighboring Galt are taken as a dire warning against the dangers of questioning the social order.

Heritage and history are cornerstones of Taldan identity. Families of all social standings can trace their lineage back dozens of generations, and heirlooms hold enormous sentimental and monetary value—swords from the Shining Crusade; elegant, if mismatched, tea sets dating back a thousand years; Azlanti amulets—to the point that Taldan markets boom with counterfeit antiques. Historical subjects feature prominently in the artwork, operas, and plays that Taldans adore, and even the smallest villages maintain at least a few statues of major historical figures or events; these reminders of the nation's glory fill every day of a Taldan's life.

To non-Taldans, this pride and reverence for the past seem aloof, pompous, or deliberately ignorant of the nation's present state. While a certain pride manifests in most members of Taldan society (becoming more pronounced the higher one rises in the social hierarchy), much of Taldor's haughty reputation is exaggerated by foreigners who fail to understand the nearly religious role heritage plays in Taldan life.

For all their love of history, the empire's people have surprisingly short memories. With thousands of years of existence, cherry-picking the most notable events—often without understanding their contexts—comes naturally, especially to those who can't afford formal education. Many Taldan history books have gaps that stretch across hundreds of years; it's not that nothing important happened during these periods, just nothing the authors deemed important enough to include. Beyond affecting historical texts, Taldor's shortsighted view of history means that even recent embarrassments are overlooked by all but a small nonvocal few. While military defeats such as the Battle of Nagisa top the list of "forgotten" history, so too do illogical or impetuous royal edicts, including a period in which only nobles were permitted to wear beards and the short-lived



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outlawing of all worship of Sarenrae within the country; many modern Taldans scratch their heads when they hear of Sarenites viewing their nation with suspicion or skepticism.

Daily life in modern Taldor is very different for members of the nobility than for the common people, so much so that both classes often have little understanding of the plights and triumphs of the other. In both cases, however, Taldans work tirelessly to maintain complex facades; nobles compete with one another relentlessly to attain ever-higher levels of social elitism, while the common folk roll up their sleeves for a life of hard work and subsistence, all while maintaining a proud demeanor that belies their otherwise downtrodden existence.

A Taldan noble lives a life of extravagance at the expense of contentment with her current social situation. Ever driven to achieve the next level of acclaim—be it achieving

a new title, setting a new fashion trend, or throwing the year's most scandalous gala—Taldan nobles go to inordinate lengths to appear wealthier, more influential, and less affected by matters of the world than their peers. In many cases, especially among hereditary nobility stretching back millennia, nobles have the money to fund these exploits, though even the oldest of families might still plunge themselves into debt to maintain the illusion of relevance. Newly anointed nobility make a point of establishing themselves as “legitimate” aristocrats with extravagant debuts on the social scene, and they are known for throwing elaborate and ostentatious events to outdo their more established peers. In almost every case, nobles are never content in their wealth or popularity, knowing that other (often unseen) rivals are already planning to usurp their prominence and prestige. For all the accompanying wealth and influence, nobles in Taldor are rarely relaxed.

On the other hand, the common people of Taldor generally lack that ambition and are more concerned with dutifully performing their allotted roles in society. The nation's confusing bureaucracy and wasteful galas mean little to artisans, farmers, and merchants who will never encounter them, and so they rarely understand foreigners' preoccupation with these aspects of their nation rather than the healthy markets, sturdy roads, and unparalleled navy that keep them safe and prosperous. Commoners recognize their own vital roles in maintaining the complex machine that is Taldor and take pride in that. And while most commoners know they stand no chance of rising to the upper strata of society, they nevertheless pride themselves on small extravagancies and are thankful for the luxuries they can afford—often imported from across the length and breadth of the known world.

Taldans of all walks of life appreciate the arts, giving rise to myriad art galleries, bardic colleges, and conservatories across the countryside. Most citizens sing or play an instrument or two, and music competes with alcohol as the surest way to ease a weary farmer's aches. Even small hamlets proudly display the works of local artists in their public businesses and governmental facilities, while major cities boast the most respected conservatories in Avistan, including the Kitharodian Academy and Rhapsodic College in Oppara. Painters, sculptors, and traveling performers make a fine living in Taldor, where even peasants happily part with hard-earned silver to enjoy a show or decorate their homes with a statuette or family portrait. The fact that good roads link most cities further encourages such artistic industries among citizens and immigrants alike, and a Taldan is as likely to encounter a fellow native as an immigrant in one of the many exhibitions, theaters, and temples to Shelyn that grace the countryside.



While art may be Taldor's most famous nonmaterial export, its most common is diplomacy, which the nation produces in the form of bureaucrats, educators, and mediators demanded from Brevo to Sargava. Whether looking for a political advisor to help run a duchy in Cheliax or a negotiator to ensure an advantageous trade agreement in Druma, people all over the Inner Sea region recognize Taldans' gift for organizing and socializing. Second sons and third daughters of noble birth, who have little hope of inheriting their parents' wealth or titles, often pursue lives in this field. The most skilled diplomats from the First Empire keep close to the upper echelons of power in whatever nation they find themselves, allowing them to maintain the opulent standard of living to which they are accustomed. Far more often than anyone is willing to admit, Taldan diplomats dabble in conflicting contracts, playing multiple parties against one another to increase the apparent need for their services.

GOVERNMENT

Though nominally ruled by the grand prince, Taldor's true government takes the form of an incredibly complex bureaucracy consisting of a senate, executive agencies, military agencies, and a web of competing nobles. At varying points in its history, Taldor has been a scrappy nation of farmers beset by monsters a bastion of fearful superstition, an expansionist military power, a center of learning and science, a global trade powerhouse, and, a defender against foreign hostilities, and with each new identity, the systems of government remained, simply adding new laws and offices to address current needs. While this vast legal landscape seems impenetrable at first glance, Taldans know which laws, offices, and officials apply to their daily lives and largely ignore the rest, to the point that some government agencies exist solely on paper, without employees or a physical location. The efficacy of Taldor's government varies hugely depending on an area's direct ruler. While many towns know relative comfort and safety, in others the common folk are taxed and worked to death while their local baron or count drinks away his people's labor, gifts political allies richly, or lines his own pockets at the public expense. More commonly, however, local government consists of authorities doing what they can with what they have, with hugely mixed results. Somehow, this system is largely functional in spite of itself.

The title of grand prince is bestowed upon the hereditary emperor of Taldor, first claimed by First Emperor Taldaris when he united disparate city-states to form a nation. The grand prince sits upon the Lion Throne and wears the Primogen Crown—the two most notable symbols of his station—and he wields absolute

authority over the government and Taldor's military, which grand princes across history have used to differing degrees and for varied goals. The rare autocratic grand prince rules with a heavy hand and near-martial law—often to Taldor's detriment. Most who have held the title are more concerned with their immediate circle and pet projects than they are maintaining order throughout the nation, leaving the day-to-day administration of the government to the slew of nobles and officials.

The position of grand prince passes down through strict adherence to primogeniture; when the grand prince dies, the crown passes to his eldest son or his closest male relative. Daughters are not seen as fit heirs under any circumstances—a historical holdover to which Taldor still stubbornly clings. Many a grand prince has formally adopted a financial supporter, strong ally, or war hero as his son to ensure an heir both he and the empire approve of. The current ruler, Grand Prince **Stavian III** (CN old male human aristocrat 8/wizard 4) has no living sons, having lost his only male heir, Carrius II, in an equestrian accident. His surviving child, the Princess **Eutropia** (NG female human aristocrat 7/swashbuckler^{ACG} 6), has no legal claim to the throne, but she has nevertheless worked to revolutionize the nation's archaic ways, urging Taldor's youth to take to the streets and demand her formal appointment to the Primogen Crown upon her father's death. The grand prince is deeply disturbed at his daughter's rabble-rousing, but he trusts that the traditions of Taldor will remain in place even when he is gone.

Stavian III has proven to be a distant and indulgent grand prince—a common occurrence for those who hold his exalted title—using his position of power to surround himself with political lapdogs and sycophants who stroke his ego, while ignoring issues of state. The grand prince has ruled for over 40 years, and while he has had dalliances with many mistresses over the decades, in addition to his marriage to the princess regent, he has sired no further offspring. Given the untimely death of his only son, Carrius II, 19 years ago, most scholars fear the emperor is still lost in grief over his son's death or else has grown paranoid of an obvious heir usurping him. In the absence of a male heir, the question of succession for the aging grand prince worries some in Oppara's halls of power. The most obvious heir is High Strategos **Maxillar Pythareus** (LN male human cavalier^{APG} 14), a popular war hero, current leader of the empire's military, and distant cousin by marriage to the Stavian line. Rumors suggest that Stavian III has already attempted and failed to arrange a marriage between Pythareus and his willful daughter, and he may soon formally adopt the general as his son instead. The emperor has not yet revealed his plans, however—and in fact has not spoken much of Eutropia publicly for a decade.



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Beneath the grand prince is Taldor's senate, a body of 222 hereditary legislators tasked with translating the grand prince's commands into formal law and ensuring that the moving parts of the government function as intended. In practice, the senate manages most of the nation's governance, albeit hindered by its own intrigues and frequent partisan deadlocks. Senate positions—in theory at least—are elected for life among nobles in whatever district or industry they represent, but they can also be passed down to an heir. Most positions therefore pass through long-established families for centuries, resulting in a legislature dominated by birthright rather than any political desire or acumen. The grand prince can circumvent the election of senators and instead fill vacated senate positions as he wishes, though Stavian III uses this authority sparingly. At any given time, a dozen or more senate seats sit vacant due to lack of heirs, sudden death, or gross public humiliation of the previous senator while their representative districts argue over how, when, or even if to elect a replacement.

Overwhelmingly, the responsibility of governance falls to Taldor's overworked and labyrinthine bureaucracies. Accidental and intentional redundancies—sometimes working at opposing goals—as well as ceremony, red tape, and lack of oversight slow the progress of most projects, but despite its many faults, the bureaucracy keeps the daily operations of Taldor functioning, even if just barely. This keeps the government and life in Taldor fairly consistent, even if the inner workings are frustratingly arcane. The system provides a certain level of job security to most government officials, as well as sometimes significant autonomy. Working within the byzantine halls of government remains one of the two most effective ways for a commoner to ascend to the ranks of the nobility, and while less life-endangering than military service, it still inflicts its fair share of scars and even death.

NOBLE TITLES

Taldor employs myriad noble titles; the crown awards them as political favors, and many titles have long since become essentially useless, collected purely for prestige among the aristocracy. Many nobles hold multiple titles, further complicating matters. A noble can be the baron of one stretch of land and the marquess of the abutting wilderness, all while holding the titles of primarch and viceroy for unrelated deeds. To ignore any accumulated title in formal introductions is grossly insulting, but in day-to-day affairs most nobles fall back on their most prestigious titles for expediency.

While some titles held specific meaning in the distant past, only a handful still do today. These titles may again change in the coming centuries, but for now the titles below are more than simply honorifics, in roughly descending order of prestige.

Grand Duke: Rules a prefecture and answers directly to the grand prince; because this is one of the few titles strictly defined by the land it is tied to, Taldor is limited to 62 grand dukes: 12 who wield real power (sometimes referred to as grand high dukes) and 50 lesser grand dukes (unofficially referred to as nominal grand dukes).

Governor: Appointed by the crown to rule a province; most are also nominal grand dukes.

Duke: Typically rules a duchy within a prefecture; dukes who serve a grand duke directly without governing lands are called attending dukes.

Senator: Votes in the senate; must have a noble rank.

Marquess: Guards a large wilderness estate or border region, such as those in the wild prefectures of Verduran or the World's Edge Mountains; generally looked down upon as uncouth, backwater nobility, but often command impressive military resources to defend against invaders or monsters.

Count/Earl: Rules a county (large tract of land and people within a duchy); counts and earls argue frequently over who holds dominion over the other.

Landgrave: Administrates a nonwilderness tract of land that lacks a settlement (such as canals, isolated farms, ranching lands, trade roads, etc.); theoretically the equal of a marquess, but in reality far less prestigious, as landgraves lack the military power a marquess wields.

Baron: Rules a barony (large swath of land with up to a dozen communities) or sometimes a single major city, or else an unlanded advisor to the crown.

Baronet: Assists a baron in administering the baron's lands; baronets are rarely landed themselves.

Viscount: Administrates a swath of land within a county, traditionally including two towns and the lands between them.

Tribune: Oversees a community, functioning as its mayor and judge; technically an elected position, but almost always a title granted in exchange for political favors; usually answer to barons.

Lord: Holds and rules specific lands; usually a knight; normally answers to a baron rather than a viscount.

Knight: The lowest noble rank in Taldor, though many overlapping ranks and titles exist within "knight," including elector, esquire, and patrician; newly awarded nobles almost always begin at this rank (especially those who achieve the rank through military service); likewise, the children of noble families who've yet to prove themselves often begin as knights.

RELATIONS

Many nations in the Inner Sea region have been heavily impacted by Taldor over the millennia, whether the interactions were genial or antagonistic. The relations between Taldor and the modern nations with the greatest impact on it and its policies are described below.

ABSALOM

Many of Absalom's original settlers originally hailed from Taldor, and their descendants still constitute some of its most influential movers and shakers and often maintain ties to the motherland. The two nations remain generally strong allies. Taldor's strong navy helps protect the island nation from piracy and invasion, while Taldor considers Absalom a beloved Azlanti child, though past experiences have tempered the desire to formally annex the island.

ANDORAN

Andoran expunged more of the Taldan influence from its society than any other former territory, though it still owes much of its stability to a people's council built in the model of Taldor's senate. The freedom-loving people of Andoran wince at the abuses of Taldor's aristocracy. Eagle Knights, Gray Corsairs, and diplomats all work to spread their democratic ideals in Taldor, but they must do so cautiously, as Taldor remains a strong trading partner responsible for much of Andoran's prosperity.

CHELIAX

The Infernal Empire maintains a complicated relationship with Taldor, from whom Cheliox inherited a byzantine system of bureaucracy and social hierarchies. Despite their similarities, Cheliox recognizes that Taldor's apparent foppishness does not apply to its military, and Queen Abrogail is uninterested in testing her mettle against Taldor's navy. As long as Taldor doesn't meddle in Chelish affairs, the two nations are content with the tense peace that allows both to benefit from securing their respective ends of the Inner Sea.

QADIRA

Despite millennia of animosity and war, Taldor and Qadira now exist in relative peace. The border remains militarized, even in light of the Grand Campaign's official end over a century ago. Members of both nations' governments and elite are still suspicious of the other, but neither moves to influence the other openly, though a lasting rivalry exists between their mutual intelligence agencies, Taldor's Lion Blades and Qadira's own Hatharat.

HISTORY

Of the extant nations in the Inner Sea region, few have a history that stretches back as far as Taldor. Fewer still can rightfully claim the level of influence on the region wielded by the First Empire. Its reach once stretched from the World's Edge Mountains to the Arcadian Ocean, and it even influenced Casmaron and northern Garund. Taldor has seen times of triumph and times of decline, but has always played an important role in the evolution and fate of the entire region. Taldor's history predates even Aroden's apotheosis and the founding of Absalom, one of the cornerstones of Avistani history.

In the earliest days of the Age of Anguish, as humanity began to establish lasting city-states in the wake of Earthfall, the descendants of Azlanti refugees first settled on the northeastern shores of the Inner Sea. Pushed ever eastward first by deadly orcs and later by increasingly organized Kellid clans, these settlers found the sparsely inhabited lands around the Verduran Forest a welcome respite.

Their bloodlines and culture having mixed with Garundi, Keleshites, and Kellids in the tumultuous centuries before, few of these first Taldans were true inheritors of an Azlanti legacy, and many of the ruined empire's cultures, faith, magic, and traditions had already been lost to time. The first Taldans were their own people, hardy and willful, and their city-states grew strong.

For centuries, these eastern city-states—among them the modern cities of Cassomir, Oppara, and Zimar—existed as independent entities, sometimes at war, often in competition, and each maintaining its own distinct culture. In -1293 AR, the grand prince Taldaris of Oppara, who was rumored to have been raised by wild lions on the Tandak Plains before being adopted by Opparan soldiers, began a 12-year campaign to unite the scattered communities under a single banner. With a combination of superior forces, tactical prowess, and uncanny luck, Taldaris laid siege first to the neighboring states that posed the greatest threat, and then he brought his resources to bear on farther-flung and weaker targets. Over the course of their



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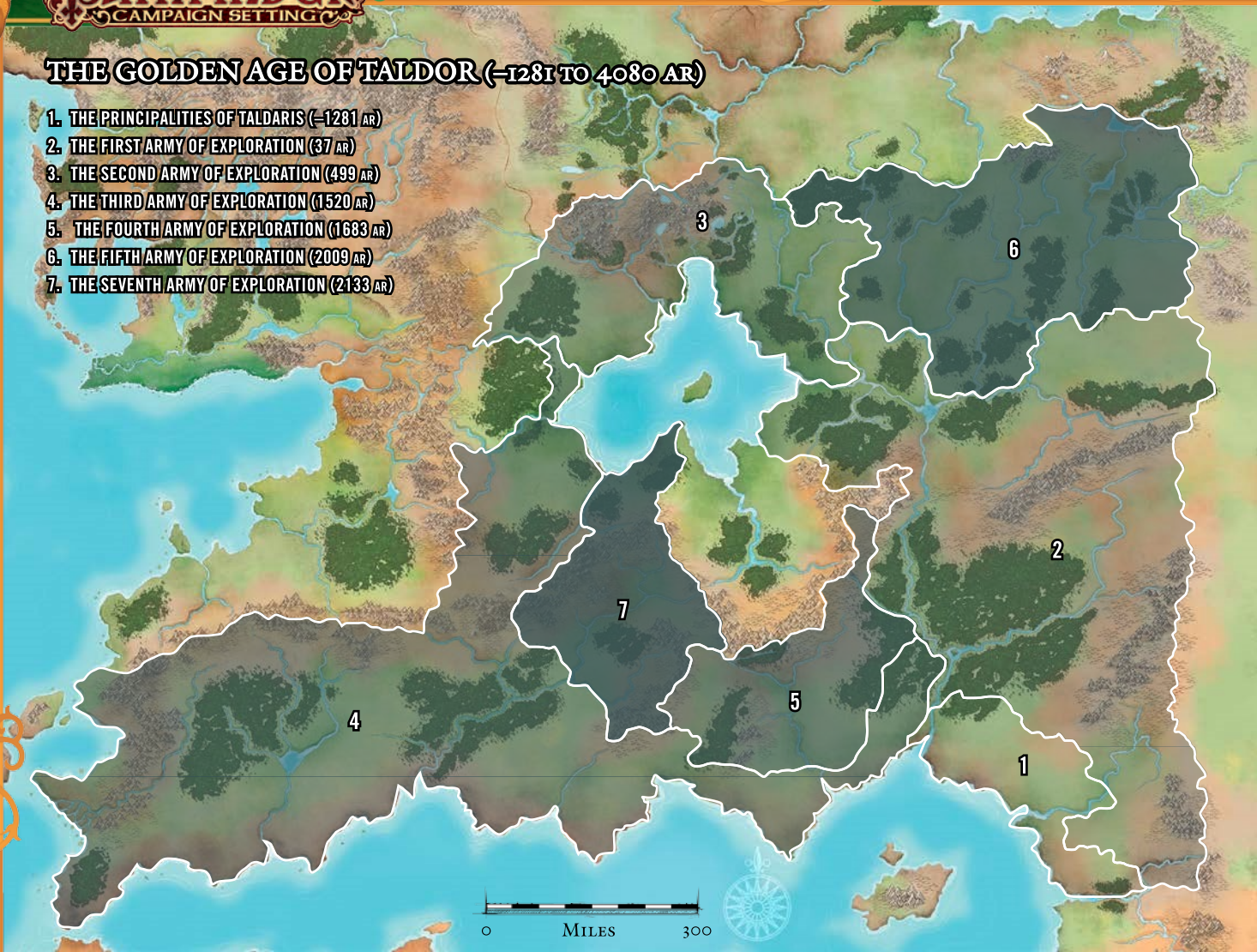
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THE GOLDEN AGE OF TALDOR (–1281 TO 4080 AR)

1. THE PRINCIPALITIES OF TALDARIS (–1281 AR)
2. THE FIRST ARMY OF EXPLORATION (37 AR)
3. THE SECOND ARMY OF EXPLORATION (499 AR)
4. THE THIRD ARMY OF EXPLORATION (1520 AR)
5. THE FOURTH ARMY OF EXPLORATION (1683 AR)
6. THE FIFTH ARMY OF EXPLORATION (2009 AR)
7. THE SEVENTH ARMY OF EXPLORATION (2133 AR)



emperor's unnaturally long rule (finally ending with his death in –1144 AR), citizens of the Principalities of Taldaris came to see themselves as a single civilized nation, named Taldor, united against the barbarity of an untamed and unexplored world.

Taldor spent centuries taming the wild lands within its nascent borders, battling gnolls, kobolds, and orcs that preyed upon its people and plundered its growing wealth. The first great threat to the nation came in –632 AR, when the Spawn of Rovagug known as the Tarrasque laid waste to the empire of Ninshabur to the east and eventually tore a hole through the World's Edge Mountains, forming the Porthmos Gap. The beast left a trail of death and destruction in its wake, leveling Oppara and many other Taldan cities before continuing its predations on Avistan at large. Taldor nearly ended in the wake of this destruction. For 2 centuries, rulers seeking to rebuild demanded back-breaking labor from common folk beset by widespread famine, fueling near-constant rebellions. Taldor finally began a campaign of civic improvements such as aqueducts, canals, and roads to appease its

populace—and allow its military to move freely to quell the frequent uprisings.

All of Taldor's achievements were truly put to the test in the century preceding Absalom's founding, when the westward expansion of the Padishah Empire of Kelesh brought Keleshite armies through Taldor's southern territory, formally conquering its loosely controlled southern territories to create the satrapy of Qadira in –43 AR. After decades of diplomatic bickering, Taldor and its southern neighbor engaged in the first of many border skirmishes with the Battle of Urfā in –4 AR. Accurately anticipating a long conflict, both nations began fortifying their borders.

Just 5 years later, the region was forever changed when Aroden performed a miracle, raising the Starstone—and the entire Isle of Kortos—from the depths of the Inner Sea, and became a god in the process. Azlanti culture and heritage surged in popularity, and Aroden's faith sprang up almost overnight. Seeing the works of this ascended Azlanti as proof of its superiority, Taldor established the center of the Arodenite faith in Oppara.

Within a generation of this cultural revival, Taldor began its first major period of expansion with the formation of the Great Army of Exploration (later deemed by historians the First Army of Exploration). Commanded by the ambitious and ostentatious General Porthmos—for whom the gap, river, and eventual prefecture were named—the army set out up the Sellen River in 37 AR. Hardly outside the confines of Taldor, Porthmos and his army destroyed the Goroth Lodge, the bastion of corrupt druidic magic in the Verduran Forest, and charted the Sellen River as far north as modern-day Sevenarches in the southern River Kingdoms. Taldor officially annexed the land between the forest and Sevenarches as the province of Galt in 115 AR, marking Taldor's transition from powerful nation to empire. Over the next 4 centuries, successive expeditions charted much of what is now Galt, Kyonin, Razmiran, and the southern River Kingdoms, establishing military and trading outposts at strategic locations up to the shores of Lake Encarthan.

On the eve of the sixth century of Absalom Reckoning, Taldor once again sent forth the Second Army of Exploration, this one headed north from Lake Encarthan. By this time, the empire had built a strong economy based around the lake and aimed to secure those investments by exploring and studying the peoples with whom they traded—primarily Kellids and Varisians who had lived there since the Age of Darkness. The army explored the region now known as Lastwall and Ustlav, but it was ultimately halted in its westward march by the orcs of the Hold of Belkzen. The Second Army of Exploration instead pushed south into modern-day Molthune and Nirmathas, though dwindling supplies and strong resistance from locals ultimately halted its advance.

Taldor subsequently focused on internal affairs for nearly a full millennium, as mass exoduses of commoners seeking a better life on the new Isle of Kortos threatened stability. Partially in response to this insecurity, General Coren led the Third Army of Exploration westward along the northern coast of the Inner Sea in 1520 AR, expanding Taldor's reach to the Arcadian Ocean. The port city of Corentyn, in the shadow of the Arch of Aroden, was established as a western stronghold and named in the general's honor. Coren later took the army from Corentyn north into Molthune, where they spent over a decade retracing the path of the Second Army of Exploration in reverse and establishing supply forts along Lake Encarthan's southern shores.



WORLDBREAKER

Securing the circle between Taldor's western empire and Lake Encarthan took another century, and was completed only when the Fourth Army of Exploration, led by General Khastalus, mapped and claimed the regions of Isgar and northern Andoran. Lush and fertile, Andoran became an official province in 1707 AR. Tensions with the local Kellids in the region exploded in the wake of this conquest, making the Aspodell Mountains and surrounding lands among the most troubled within Taldor's borders. The so-called Aspodell Campaign against the Kellid nations of central Avistan lasted until 2133 AR, when the Seventh Army of Exploration slaughtered the Isgar tribe—the most powerful clan opposing Taldan rule. The newly formed protectorate between Andoran and Molthune was named Isgar in the tribe's memory. Taldans still consider the 400-year war against a "barbaric and simple" people an embarrassment, while modern Kellids consider it a testimony to their people's strength and tenacity.

Two additional Armies of Exploration further expanded Taldor's borders in the twenty-first century. The Fifth (2009–14) extended the empire north through Rostland and Issia to the shores of the Lake of Mists and Veils, and the Sixth (2080–89) ranged through northern Garund. Both armies were equipped with a massive magical siege engine called the *Worldbreaker*, which greatly reduced the resistance they faced along the way. Despite this advantage, the Sixth Army of Exploration never established a Taldan province in Garund, in part because the army met the forces of the Gorilla King at the Battle of Nagisa in 2089 AR. The Gorilla King and his charau-ka stole *Worldbreaker* from the defeated army, and General Erestos Marburran led his few remaining forces back across the Inner Sea to Taldor in shame. Historians largely agree that this embarrassing loss—the consequence of the empire's overambitious reach and inability to manage its farthest-flung resources—marked the beginning of Taldor's decline.

Throughout these centuries of Taldan expansion to the north and west, the empire's long-standing rival to the south and east, Qadira, built up its own fortifications. To those Taldans living south of Oppara and the River Porthmos, the Keleshite threat was always at the front of their minds, and served as a motivating factor in the empire's growth and amassing of resources from across Avistan. After all, Qadira was but the westernmost satrapy of the continent-spanning Padishah Empire of Kelesh; for Taldor to stand a chance economically or militarily against it, it would need to span a continent of its own.


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Tensions flared up into minor skirmishes and sometimes even prolonged conflicts that lasted a year or two at a time, but none were so significant as to stand out from the rest. War along Taldor's southern border simply became the status quo, encouraging the people of Taldor to seek out new distractions farther beyond their borders.

In 1553 AR, the Qadiran satrap, Xerbystes I, declared his title hereditary and in the process began the dynasty that bears his name. In exchange, he gave up control over Qadira's foreign affairs to a Padishah-appointed vizier, but not before he further cemented his legacy by signing a peace treaty with Taldan Grand Prince Urios III to end the cold war between the two nations. This period of tranquility became known as the Urian Peace, and it lasted for over 2,500 years.

The Urian Peace did not spare Taldor from loss and strife, however. In 2632 AR, the first elves returned through the Sovyrian Stone and reclaimed Kyonin, pushing all Taldans in the region back across the Sellen River. Just over a century later, a plague known as the Choking Death spread from Iobaria down the busy trade route, devastating Taldor's population, especially in the heart of the empire. In 2920 AR, a series of massive earthquakes devastated both Taldor and Qadira, killing tens of thousands and leveling entire cities. Rapid reconstruction buried many of these ruins, creating extensive underground networks beneath several Taldan cities exploited by criminals and the monsters otherwise wiped out on the surface. Several Taldan noble families accepted the earthquakes as proof that Qadira worshiped Rovagug and conspired to release the Rough Beast from his prison. While such claims were largely dismissed by an empire more concerned with rebuilding than placing blame, they nevertheless planted the seed of xenophobia that would eventually end of the Urian Peace. Several of these nobles formed a secret society—the White Wardens—and attempted an ultimately doomed coup. Grand Prince Remoque V stripped members of the White Wardens of titles and fortune before exiling them, narrowly averting war with Qadira. Noble conspiracies motivated by the glory and profits that war brings continued to threaten the Urian Peace for centuries.

One of these subsequent conspiracies involved the attempted use of a fabled *orb of dragonkind*, which nearly destroyed the empire in 3660 AR when the instigators unwittingly drove the nation's metallic dragons into a mindless frenzy. The 12 long years that followed became known as the Dragon Plague, and it left cities destroyed and thousands dead before Taldan heroes finally slew the last of the rampaging beasts. Chromatic dragons from across Avistan subsequently flocked to the power vacuum left behind, leading to a century of violence and dragonslaying that still colors Taldor's culture. Noble families of any standing still boast of ancestors who hunted dragons in

this era, bid for artifacts of the age, or else organize dragon hunts—often meeting horrific fates in the process.

In 3754 AR, Taldor launched the largest military offensive in its history, not against Qadira but against the forces of the Whispering Tyrant that threatened the lands north and west of Lake Encarthan. The so-called Shining Crusade established Taldor as the Inner Sea region's preeminent military power, but it cost the empire and its allies dearly in lives, morale, and money. The crusade lasted over 150 years, finally resulting in Tar-Baphon's defeat at the hands of Taldan General Arnisant. The Arodenite Knights of Ozem, who played a vital role in the crusade's victory over the Whispering Tyrant and his undead armies, established the protectorate of Lastwall—a formal colony—to keep vigil over the lich's prison of Gallowspire.

As this age of dragonslayers and holy crusades wound down, the Urian Peace ended when Taldor's southern neighbor invaded in 4079 AR, taking advantage of how overextended Taldor was. The Qadiran invaders sacked Zimar, razing it and other southern Taldan holdings to the ground and prompting the entire empire to mobilize against the threat. The war with Qadira, deemed the Grand Campaign by Taldor, raged for over 500 years, during which time Taldor lost little land to the Keleshites to their south but ceded all of its holdings west of the Sellen River and north of the Fog Peaks. This dramatic reduction in the empire's size came not through war, however, but in bloodless secessions motivated and made possible by the ongoing conflict on the Qadiran front. The nation's many ambitious colonies had grown frustrated, first at paying for the reconstruction after the Dragon Plague and then at supporting a war so far removed from colonials' daily lives.

Aspex the Even-Tongued, the governor of Cheliox, was the first to break away. He severed the province's ties to Taldor and declared himself king. His initial claim included all Taldan territories along the Inner Sea west of the Sellen River, and he later claimed Isger and Galt through the threat of force in the so-called Even-Tongued Conquest. Lastwall effectively became a sovereign nation by declaring its neutrality in the conflict, and the various territories north of Galt splintered into the fractious River Kingdoms, Rostland, and Issia. In a single decade, Taldor's empire was shattered and its holdings reduced to a quarter of what it controlled at its height.

A mere 3 years after the Grand Campaign drew to a close, Aroden's death threw the empire into chaos once again. All contact with the Eighth Army of Exploration—launched in honor of the god's expected return—ceased as the naval expedition was cast about in storms before eventually landing in Tian Xia. The colony Amanandar, founded by the survivors, remains isolated from its mother empire, and despite serving as a center of Taldan culture on the other side of the world, it has done little to help Taldor recover from millennia of decline.

THE TIMELINE OF TALDOR

- 1281 AR General Taldaris of Oppara conquers the scattered city-states along the Inner Sea, unites them to form Taldor, and becomes its first emperor.
- 632 AR The Tarrasque tears open the Porthmos Gap and destroys Oppara.
- 78 AR Keleshite troops begin a campaign of conquest through Taldor's southern territories along the Pashman River.
- 43 AR The Padishah Empire of Kelesh halts its southern conquests at the River Ladan and formally incorporates the satrapy of Qadira.
- 4 AR Qadira's and Taldor's borders expand to overlap one another, causing the first border skirmish between the two empires: the Battle of Urfa near White Pass.
- 1 AR Aroden raises the Isle of Kortos from the Inner Sea and becomes a living god, with Oppara as the center of his worship.
- 37 AR Taldor's First Army of Exploration, led by General Porthmos, destroys the druidic Goroth Lodge in the Verduran Forest and charts the Sellen River north to Sevenarches.
- 115 AR The province of Galt is established.
- 499 AR The Second Army of Exploration pushes north and west from Lake Encarthan, exploring Ustalav.
- 1520 AR Taldor's Third Army of Exploration, led by General Coren, conquers the northern shore of the Inner Sea, founding Corentyn at its farthest edge.
- 1553 AR Grand Prince Urios III and Satrap Xerbystes I sign a formal peace agreement between their nations. The period of nonaggression known as the Urian Peace begins.
- 1683 AR The Fourth Army of Exploration maps and claims areas that later become the provinces of Andoran and Isger.
- 1707 AR The province of Andoran is formally established by General Khastalus.
- 2009–2014 AR The Fifth Army of Exploration employs a magical siege engine called the *Worldbreaker* to push north through the River Kingdoms and Brevoy to the Lake of Mists and Veils.
- 2080 AR General Erestos Marburran and his Sixth Army of Exploration begin exploring northern Garund.
- 2089 AR The Sixth Army of Exploration is ambushed and destroyed by the Gorilla King at Nagisa, losing the *Worldbreaker*; Taldor begins its decline.
- 2133 AR The Seventh Army of Exploration slaughters the Kellids of the fiercely independent Isger tribe and establishes the Protectorate of Isger (named in the tribe's memory) to secure trade with Druma.
- 2632 AR Elves return to Kyonin, pushing Taldan settlers and scavengers east of the Sellen River.
- 2742 AR The disease known as the Choking Death spreads from Iobaria and devastates Taldor's population, as well as that of the rest of Avistan.
- 2920 AR Massive earthquakes devastate both Taldor and Qadira, killing tens of thousands and flattening many cities; some Taldan nobles accept this as proof that Qadira worships Rovagug and threatens to unleash the Rough Beast from his prison.
- 2921 AR Grand Prince Remoque V ends an attempted coup by the White Wardens, averting war with Qadira.
- 3007 AR Cheliox is incorporated as a province of Taldor.
- 3129 AR Qadiran assassins kill Grand Prince Jalrune; his successor, Grand Prince Hyrotte I, forms the Ulfen Guard to protect himself.
- 3660–3672 AR The so-called Dragon Plague plunges northern Taldor into a campaign of terror and violence brought about by metallic dragons.
- 3754 AR Taldor launches the Shining Crusade to destroy the lich Tar-Baphon and his undead armies.
- 3827 AR Tar-Baphon is defeated and imprisoned within his former fortress of Gallowspire.
- 3828 AR The Knights of Ozem form Lastwall, a protectorate of Taldor, to watch over Gallowspire.
- 3841 AR Treaty of the Wildwood is signed, making the Verduran Forest semiautonomous.
- 4079 AR During ongoing succession conflicts in the Padishah Empire, Qadira invades Taldor, capturing Zimar.
- 4080 AR Qadiran invaders burn most of the settlements surrounding Zimar in Ember Night, a touchstone many modern Taldans still call back to as justification of their hatred of Qadira.
- 4081–4091 AR The Even-Tongued Conquest; taking advantage of the chaos of the Qadiran invasion, Governor Aspek the Even-Tongued breaks Cheliox away from Taldor and declares himself king, claiming all lands west of the Sellen River as territory of the sovereign nation of Cheliox. He later seizes the provinces of Isger and Galt by threat of force. Lastwall declares neutrality in the conflict, effectively becoming an independent nation.
- 4082 AR Grand Prince Cydonus III, who mired his nation in debt, is poisoned by angry nobles. His successor, Beldam I, claims the poisoning was carried out by Qadiran agents.
- 4083 AR Qadira's armies reach the River Porthmos—the farthest north they push the Qadiran border over the entire war—after a series of Taldan military losses the Taldans call the Gheveran Massacres.
- 4217 AR The Yellowtongued Sickness ravages Taldor.
- 4328 AR After 2-1/2 centuries spent pushing out Qadiran invaders, Taldor launches the Heaven's Step Offensive to invade Qadira but is forced back when the Empire of Kelesh joins the war and reinforces the flagging Qadiran forces.
- 4528 AR Grand Prince Stavian I uses the war with Qadira to push out rivals prominent within the church of Sarenrae. In the Great Purge, he criminalizes the worship of Sarenrae and orders her temples closed.
- 4603 AR Taldor and Qadira declare peace after 5 centuries of war; trade between Avistan and Kelesh reopens. Worship of Sarenrae is declared legal again.
- 4606 AR The Eighth Army of Exploration, led by General Orphyrea Amandar, sets sail to discover new lands to conquer overseas; Aroden dies.
- 4608 AR The Eighth Army of Exploration lands in Shenmen in Tian Xia; pushing inland, it conquers the city of Kamikobu and establishes the isolated Taldan colony of Amanandar.
- 4667 AR The Red Revolution begins in Galt. Many nobles flee into Taldor with little but their titles, creating an underclass of penniless nobles in the north.
- 4689 AR Taldor begins a new naval campaign of harassment and privateering against Qadiran trading ships.
- 4717 AR The present year.

TALDOR,
THE FIRST
EMPIRELIFE IN
TALDOR

GAZETTEER

ADVENTURES
IN TALDOR

BESTIARY

