

*Requires the use of the Dungeons & Dragons® Player's Handbook*

# ATHENÆUM ARCANÆ

## FESTIVALS, FAIRS, AND HOLY DAYS



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# A+HENAEMUM ARCANÆ: FEST+IVALS, FAIRS, AND HØLY DAYS

## INTRODUCTION

This PDF is designed to help GMs world build and bring adventures out of the dungeon by providing five ready-to-use festivals, fairs, and holy days. It's an invaluable tool for building a textured culture, for throwing at PCs to enliven their arrival in a new community, and for weaving a unique tapestry to serve as the backdrop for urban adventure.

Learning how people celebrate allows us to better understand their values, their fears,

their collective personality. While PCs may quickly forget details about a pig-raising village they passed through, it's unlikely they'd forget the community that hosts the Razorback Festival during which pigs are slaughtered and in butcher-bees and which culminates in the grand spectacle of slaves engaging in gladiatorial combat against a dire boar...the survivors being granted freedom and existence as were-boars.

## THE EVENTS

### FAUGH

**Where:** *Faugh*, a local dialect word meaning "high sun", is most adhered to in communities existing in a temperate region. Elements have survived as towns evolved into cities, but it nonetheless remains dominantly a "provincial" festival.

**When:** This festival is linked with the summer solstice, the hottest period of the year.

**Who:** In villages and towns, the entire community turns out to take part in the activities. In cities, however, only recent émigrés from the countryside recognize the event, and it's a much more low-key event, usually celebrated only within the home or amongst other with recent rural roots.

**How:** The day begins early with parties setting out into the woods in search of walnuts, which will be gathered in great quantities in order to make the traditional walnut liqueur known as *nocino*. It's a task not without its dangers, however. Gatherers must contend with boars similarly foraging for nuts, and they always run the risk of disturbing beasts made irritable by the muggy heat.

When the foragers return around dusk, the entire community rejoices and joins together to feast. While the partying begins, the oldmen and their apprentices that have been entrusted with the secret of making *nocino* begin their work. The rationale being those tempted to spy will be otherwise distracted by the festivities. Of course, the punishment for spying is dire indeed: public blinding with red hot rods before the entire congregated populace.

A highlight of the evening is the magicians that regale the crowds with their skill. Even the smallest hamlet will save enough gold to hire a petty spellcaster (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> level sorcerer or wizard), while larger villages and towns can afford more elaborate shows, with troupes of spellcasters and more skilled mages. Neighboring towns vie for the honor of attracting the most accomplished guest wizard and largest complement. PC sorcerers or wizards may be hired to perform at the festival.

Finally, as midnight approaches, everyone retires for communal night bathing. In villages or small towns this is typically in a

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nearby stream or lake, though in larger centers it might be in purposefully pools or bath-houses.

**Adventure Seed:** The adventure begins with characters strolling into town the day before the festival. Any wizards or sorcerer with the party are recruited for the magic demonstration. As well, because goblinoid raiders have recently become active in the area, the party is hired to safeguard those foraging for nuts. Their foresight pays off handsomely when the PCs defeat a goblinoid band intent on wiping out the foragers (at the GMs discretion, characters may also rescue people treed by an angry bear or other large beast, and generally play nurse-maid to a bunch of helpless commoners).

During the evening festivities, the characters spot several goblins that have infiltrated the village. Giving chase, they mistakenly stumble upon the brewers engaged in their secretive work. No one else having seen the offending goblins, the characters are accused of spying and must fast-talk their way to safety, produce the goblins, or effect an escape from a town of pitchfork wielding peasants.

## RAVEN'S EVE

**Where:** Anywhere, as Raven's Eve is equally acknowledged by peasants and nobility, country-folk and urbanites. The more notorious activities associated with Raven's Eve tend to be associated with larger cities, however, where the idle rich who partake in them tend to be more plentiful.

**When:** Raven's Eve is associated with the winter solstice, a day when folklore says ravens go on murderous frenzy.

**Who:** Raven's Eve may be a holy-day that crosses social boundaries, but the rich and poor nonetheless worship it in completely different fashion. Peasants spend the day cele-

brating in large, boisterous crowds as a way of warding off the evil. The nobility, on the other hand, hold solemn and secretive ceremonies during the day, only publicly acknowledging Raven's Eve as the sun begins to set...

**How:** It's said that this evening is a time when spirits are active, and that the maddened behavior of ravens and crows on this day is a result of the weakening of the boundaries between the realms of the living and dead. Common people fear nighttime retribution at the hands of angered spirits, and so spend the day celebrating the deceased, especially those who passed within the year prior.

Large bonfires are lit just before dawn, both to warm revelers during the coming day's festivities and to frighten away the blood-thirsty birds. Much dancing and feasting takes place around these fires. Wine, symbolizing the blood of the dead, is consumed in copious amounts; drunkenness is a common way of blurring the fears that underlay this day. Most people wear black masks to hide their identities from vengeance seeking spirits that may be active unnaturally early.

The highlight of the day, if it can be called that, is the public executions. Criminals are hanged in town squares and left to be picked clean by carrion birds. Huge flocks of cawing ravens and crows soon converge on the corpses. These sacrifices appease the birds by sating their hunger, and also appease the spirits' thirst for revenge.

As soon as the sun begins to set revelers return to their homes to decorate doors with rowan wreaths, which are said to ward away spirits and undead.

Such is the public face of Raven's Eve. However, the aristocracy—nobility and wealthy merchants—celebrate the day in a much more private and much less joyous manner. They spend their days in solemn prayer, honoring in private chapels lined with

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braziers burning incense those who have died. The aristocracy fast as a way of cleansing themselves of sin, drinking only wine laced with human blood. Masks and black robes are worn, but never footwear, in spite of the cold—again, to cleanse themselves of sins.

When night descends upon the world, the wealthy worshippers finally emerge from their chapels. They slip out of their townhouses and palaces to stalk the streets in search of victims. They believe that the spirits need far more graphic demonstrations of violence than that offered by the public executions in order to be appeased. Their answer is to murder riffraff and other undesirable elements in ritualistic fashion.

**Adventure Seed:** The small city of Uxengold is in full celebration of Raven's Eye when, from Potters Field (the cemetery where the beggars and the riff-raff are interred) the dead arise. All of the corpses are former victims of the aristocrats' holiday sacrifices, and march inexorably towards the chapel where the city elite are holed up in prayer. The undead are under the command of a deranged wizard in search of revenge—during the previous year's ceremony his wife was mistaken for a prostitute and was ritually executed.

The city erupts in panic at the sight of the undead, and so efforts by the PCs to stop the rampaging corpses are hindered by panicked mobs, looting, and other madness. A maddening flock of bloodthirsty crows adds to the mayhem. The horde of walking dead being too numerous to confront in a straight fight, PCs will likely have to race against time to find their unholy master or fall back to the chapel and defend the building itself (in a scene straight out of Night of the Living Dead).

Characters that are aware of the aristocrats' night-time Raven's Eve traditions may question whether they're worth saving.....

## ACANAVEADOS TØURNAMENT

**Where:** Acanaveados tournaments, like other knightly tournaments, are sponsored by the nobility and therefore take place within the shadow of a castle, tower, or other noble seat. As a result, they are rarely hosted by small communities. Unlike jousts, which are gentlemanly expressions of martial ability that take place in peaceful kingdoms (or at least kingdoms currently at peace), acanaveados tournaments typically take place in a climate of hostility, like that which might be experienced in frontier areas that border on enemy states or lands inhabited by humanoid hordes. The constant skirmishing and blood-letting gives rise to this unique form of knightly demonstration.

**When:** There is no particular date in which an acanaveados tournament might be held. It's at the whim of the host, and often coincides with events such as weddings, crowning ceremonies, or celebrating victory over the enemy.

**Who:** While it is the nobles who host the events, and occasionally common-class might get to witness some of the activities, acanaveados tournaments are really for and about knights (the term in this context refers loosely to mounted warriors of distinction, not merely to paladins or cavaliers). It is their abilities that are on display, it is their service that the nobles wish to honor, and it is glory which is enhanced by a good showing.

**How:** Not all tournaments consist of jousts between rival knights. There were other ways to demonstrate one's martial abilities, though they are decidedly less chivalric in nature. The acanaveados tournament, in which traitors are used as living targets for cavalry armed with javelins or spears, is one grisly example.

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Entrants take turns charging down a jousting list, throwing javelins at victims (almost always captured enemy warriors) who have been tied to posts arrayed along the length of the field. Points are awarded for location of hits scored, style (difficulty of the shot), and for killing blows. Prizes are afforded the winning knight.

Any mounted warrior of noble birth or battlefield distinction (2<sup>nd</sup> level and beyond) may participate, providing player character fighters and paladins an opportunity to gain glory and experience. Characters might balk at such barbaric practice. As GM, you might want to award players a story experience point reward if they do abstain, especially if to do otherwise would sacrifice their religious mores.

Of course, there's more to the festivities than javelin-throwing. Feasts are held in honor of the attending knights, allowing characters important enough to warrant an invitation the opportunity to rub elbows with a hall full of powerful individuals.

**Adventure Seed:** Having just returned from a successful punitive expedition against a tribe of hobgoblins in retaliation for the burning of outlying farms, Baron Alfonso II has called for a tournament to celebrate. Over two dozen hobgoblins have been kept alive for just that purpose. As the tournament date nears, and while exploring in the wild-lands, the PCs stumble upon a plot against Baron Alfonso II. The hobgoblin shaman had burned the farms knowing that it would goad the humans into attacking, and had cursed his people so that should they enter captivity (as he hoped they would) they would unwittingly serve his dark designs. When the sun sets after the acanaveado tournament is complete, the body of each captive slain by way of javelin will erupt in a mass of infernal ants that will consume everything in sight. If enough are released and they are left

unchecked, they might just devour the entire barony. The PCs must race to stop this ritual, but in order to do so, must either masquerade as knights or use stealth and subterfuge to gain entrance to Baron Alfonso's castle where the jousts take place.

## DEVIL'S HØRSE MARKET

**Where:** The village of Scratch's Post, population 400 (feel free to replace Scratch's Post with any small, rural, roadside community in your own campaign).

**When:** The three days prior to the first full-moon of autumn. It was on this evening, many years ago, that a brigand attempted to steal the horse from what seemed to be an enfeebled old man. Unfortunately for him, the old cripple turned out to be the devil Furcas, who promptly severed the brigands head from his body with a stroke of his blade. Ever since, on the eve of his death, the headless outlaw haunts the road near Scratch's Post, riding atop an albino steed, searching for a head to replace the one he lost.

**Who:** While the entire village has come to enjoy the festivities associated with this renowned fair, it is particularly aimed towards those associated with the horse trade—breeders, buyers, craftsmen (blacksmiths, saddle-makers, wheel-wrights). People from hundreds of miles away fall upon this little village, temporarily swelling its numbers to over 2,000.

**How:** At its core, the event is one of the largest horse markets in the region, typically covering many acres and including tents from foreign lands. The stock itself is always well guarded against horse-thieves, and often-times adventurers can find temporary employ in this field. All manner of horses, barding, saddles, and other related equipment, some of it magical, is available for sale,

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though one must be careful—especially with regard to horses—not to be fleeced by unscrupulous traders (Animal Care check against Bluff; failure indicates the beats is substandard with -1d4 to 1d4 stats). On rare occasions, one may even find exotic mounts; perhaps a unicorn or a ‘trained’ manticore cub.

Over time, the market has grown to include buskers, pedlars, and entertainers. Trick riding demonstrations and jousting tournaments are fan-favorites among the villagers; the unworldly peasants don’t seem to notice that the knights are mostly grizzled men past their prime or unheralded youths, or that the trick riders perform only the most rudimentary spectacles.

The real highlight, however, takes place on the market’s final day, that of the full moon. Near Scratch’s Post is a large cave known as the Devil’s Stables, where the ghost’s albino steed appears at dawn on autumn’s first full moon, patiently awaiting his master’s nighttime arrival. Legend says that if anyone should successfully bridle the horse—actually a nightmare—and ride it from the cave, Furcas will offer the individual use of mount.

Market organizers offer a 200gp incentive for the brave or foolish to make the attempt. Everyone gathers around the cave mouth to watch as the participants enter, and wait with bated breath their emergence. Thus far, both the prize money and Furcas’ offer remain unclaimed.

**Adventure Seed:** While attending the horse market, the PCs witness numerous strange and unsettling events that may require their intervention. A manticore cub suddenly flies into a maddened frenzy and breaks free, rampaging through the masses; jousters find their wounds becoming septic and become ill with a wasting disease; a mare gives birth to a two headed, vampiric foal;

and a horde of corpses rises from the local cemetery to re-enact a strange funerary procedure. The one constant throughout all this strangeness is the presence of a dark-cloaked individual, an undead dread knight named Lord Malice, whose mere presence fills the air with an unholy shroud. He’s here to claim Furcas’ mount as his own, and unless the PCs stop him, he may just succeed....

### SØRGHUM HARVEST FESTIVALS

**Where:** Sweet sorghum is a drought resistant, heat-tolerant member of the grass family and is most commonly grown in warm environments. As a result, sorghum harvest festivals are typically found in rural, southern communities. While the plant can be grown with some success in temperate, northern climes its cultivation is not typically part of a community’s identity there and so the harvest is rarely seen as an event to celebrate.

**When:** As soon as the crops are brought in at the end of the summer (typically, the end of the ninth month).

**Who:** In Halfling villages where sweet sorghum is a common crop, the harvest festival is a communal event celebrated by everyone. Typically, the men will spend the weeks before hand aiding one another in cutting the 10’ tall canes, harvesting one farmer’s fields together before moving on to the next. By the end of the month, they are exhausted and in need of a respite. The sweet sorghum harvest festival is a chance to relax and enjoy oneself.

Merchants from further afield may also attend, view the crop and perhaps make purchases for export to distant markets.

**How:** In many respects, the event takes on the appearance of a normal country fair. There’s music and dancing, buskers and

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entertainers, peddlers stalls selling an eclectic array of wares, mule pulling competitions (including man against beast), and the crowning of a sorghum queen. This title isn't merely an honorific. The sorghum queen is an extremely prestigious position, one that entitles the holder to a seat on the local council. She is also blessed by the Earth Mother for the duration of her reign, and gains magical abilities to influence crops and succor her townsfolk (in game terms, the equivalent spell-casting ability of a 1<sup>st</sup> level druid).

Of course, the real attraction is the sorghum itself, as all good Halflings will tell you. While the merriment is underway, mule-powered presses set up in the midst of the fairgrounds squeeze juice from the plants' stems. Later, the juice is cooked over a fire until it reaches a syrupy consistency, at which time it is ready to be poured over warm biscuits or used in local delicacies such sorghum cakes.

**Adventure Hook:** The PCs are hired by a merchant to travel to the distant village of Sweet-Grass, purchase a wagon-load of sorghum during the festival, and then return with it. Of course, the task isn't as easy as it initially sounds. A competitor has likewise sent a delegation to secure sorghum and, perhaps more importantly, to prevent the PCs from acquiring any. They'll use any method short of deathly violence to achieve their aims. To that end, the newly crowned Sorghum Queen is kidnapped and secreted within a cave (which the rivals didn't know is the lair of a dire badger) while evidence pointing blame towards the PCs is expertly planted. Even should they prove their innocence and rescue the maiden, the PCs will still have to outbid their opponents and, should they succeed in that endeavor, guard the shipment from hi-jacking on the return trip.

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