



## Settlement and Ranges

The Fens are marshy areas in Kythlim Hundred in Vemionshire and Rethelsyne Hundred in Thelshire. They are bounded on their north-western side by the Nephren River. The Fens are occupied by Fenlanders, a collection of folk who prefer to live free than be bound by the strictures of feudal society. The Fenlanders have a loose confederacy of about 700 individuals in 14 semi-permanent villages and dozens of temporary encampments, hunting wild fowl, fishing and foraging according to the season.

## Origins and History

People have fled to the Fens to escape persecution, terror and slavery for hundreds of years, and stayed because of the bounty of the marsh. The first great influx of people occurred during the time of Lothrim the Foulspawner (113TR), trying to escape the carnage as he moved east through the Kald watershed. At the end of the Kaldoric Civil War, the Battle of Kiban (377TR) saw the defeat of Aidrik II and an increase in the number of people fleeing into the Fens. In the 340 years since then, the population of the Fens has remained relatively static, with influxes of people escaping the law or serfdom counter-balanced by losses through disease and floods.

Fenlanders are ethnically identical to Kaldorans. Culturally, they differ in the degree of freedom and self-determination they enjoy. They try to preserve their way of life by remaining secretive, avoiding contact with outsiders unless there is a dire need. For this reason, Fenlanders have acquired a reputation similar to the Sindarin, especially along the north-western bank of the Nephren River. Mothers use the tale of Fenlanders snatching away children and eating them as a means of frightening their own offspring into obedience. Others tell of how Fenlanders saved fishermen, washed or fallen overboard, from drowning.

## Way of Life

The semi-permanent villages in which the Fenlanders live are haphazard collections of 3 to 15 huts on wooden stilts, built high to avoid the annual spring flood, brought on by the influx of meltwater from the mountains around Lake Arain. While wood is plentiful on Hârn, planks and beams of any substantial length are scarce within the marsh. Fenlanders reserve these for major structural members of their buildings, burning only driftwood and branches too crooked to be of any other use. Huts are constructed by the whole community in late summer, when water levels in the marsh are at their lowest. An unseasonably wet spring can delay a hut-raising by a year or two.

Stilts are driven into the floor of the marsh and crossbeams pegged and lashed to these to provide stability. After a short period to let any structural weakness manifest, a circular lattice of cane is added and tied down. Next, cane lattice wall sections are secured to each other and to the floor. The wide ends of triangular roof sections are tied to the wall sections, the edges are lashed together, and the narrow ends are tied to a ring of heavy canes, which becomes the smoke hole. The cane lattices are thatched with rushes, the walls more lightly than the roof. Finally, the outside wall of the hut is smeared with wet clay, allowed to dry and then lime-washed. The result is a circular wattle-and-daub hut with a conical thatched roof that sheds water and snow with ease, is light yet sturdy and is easily repaired or replaced. A narrow walkway extends around the hut, allowing access to the entire wall and providing storage space. Huts average about twenty feet in diameter and are accessed by rope ladders.

A central fire in an iron brazier, or on a flat rock resting on a bed of clay, provides heat for cooking and warmth, and the smoke serves to keep insects at bay. Although only one room, the hut will have one or two sleeping areas curtained off by reed mats, and the inside wall of the hut is often covered with reed mats or hides.

Elaborate cane baskets, sometimes the size of trunks, are used for storage. Sleeping pallets are filled with the fluffy seeds of reeds or waterfowl feathers. Fur wraps are not uncommon, but thick woollen blankets are more normal.

The most important plant for Fenlanders is the sab reed. Rooted in the soft mud under three to ten feet of water, it grows throughout the marshes and provides the Fenlanders with food, building materials and fuel for the fire. The reed has five distinct parts, the roots, lower and upper stem, the leaves and the seeds, all of which are used. The tough, fibrous roots are used as fuel for cooking fires, once dried. They burn slowly, but with sufficient heat to boil water and cook food.

Usually under water, the lower sab stalk has a pithy centre with a high starch content. This can be dried and pounded into flour, which is used to make a kind of unleavened bread. It can be sliced and fried or grilled or it can be boiled in salted water, and served hot or cold. It is also a staple in the many varieties of fish stew the Fenlanders prepare.

A potent spirit is distilled from the fermented pith. With the same appearance as water, kohl, as it is called, is manufactured throughout the year, and each brewer has their own recipe. Some add berries, which provides a faint colouring and gives the spirit a sweet berry flavour. Others add pungent herbs to give their kohl a sharp, slightly astringent taste.

<b>LOCATION:</b>	Vemionshire, Kingdom of Kaldor
<b>STATUS:</b>	Free (outlaw)
<b>GOVERNMENT:</b>	Elected Village Chief (Valkar)
<b>POPULATION:</b>	approximately 700

## CREDITS

### WRITER

*Peter Leitch*

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Tough and long-lasting, the thin upper sab stalk is usually above the water, and provides the perfect material for weaving. Floor and wall mats, sleeping pallets, baskets, fish traps and many other utensils are made by the weavers of the villages. Using cane for the framework and the natural dyes from the plants, insects and earth of the marsh, these are often very beautiful craft items. Master weavers are highly respected members of a village.

The upper stalk is also used to make the reed boats that all Fenlanders use. Called a sabar, it is constructed by bundling a large number of reeds together into logs, and lashing the logs together to form a long, narrow raft. Both ends of the raft are drawn up into a high prow, which has the effect of bending the side logs upward slightly, thus providing a small amount of freeboard. The sabar is unsuited to rough or fast-flowing water, but is ideal in the calm waters of the marsh.

The tender, young leaves are nutritious and are eaten raw or lightly blanched. Older leaves are feed to fur-bearing rodents kept in cane cages by children as pets and food animals. The small pelts of these rodents are tanned and sewn into all manner of household goods; boots, cushions, rugs, and so on.

The fluffy seeds of the sab are gathered in mid-summer to provide stuffing for cushions and sleeping pallets. They are too small and bitter to warrant grinding them into flour and have no other uses. The seeds are surrounded by hundreds of tiny hairs which catch the smallest breeze. They are carried up into the air and deposited onto the water a great distance from the parent plant. Once the seed lands, the hairs quickly become waterlogged, and drag the seed, base first, down to the waiting mud, where it quickly sprouts.

A highly prized delicacy, young sab shoots grow swiftly in the soft mud. At this stage they are soft stalks about six inches in length. In late Agrazhar, young boys search for them, holding competitions to see who can gather the most. The shoots are carefully prepared and preserved, although a portion of the harvest is set aside for a feast in honour of Peoni, celebrating the bounty of the marsh.

For meat, the Fenlanders hunt waterfowl, aquatic rodents and fish. Waterfowl are brought down with throwing sticks or slings, or trapped. The aquatic rodents are trapped or speared and fish are trapped, netted, or speared. Hunting and fishing are predominantly male occupations. Most men take part in all these activities, but a few specialise in trapping or fishing. The women forage for other foods. The majority of sab weavers are also female, although some of the best are men who are unable to get around for some reason, such as the loss of a leg or paralysis of the lower body.

The extended family, called a clan, is the central unit of Fenlander society. It includes parents, grandparents and children. Older women teach the younger children while older men pass on their knowledge to their sons and grandsons.

As in Kaldoran villages, miscreants are fined or given some other suitable punishment up to and including twenty strokes of the whip. The rare cases of violent crimes such as rape or murder are all punishable by death. It is not a particularly pleasant death, for the marsh harbours an adder whose bite is fatal, after a short and excruciatingly painful period of convulsions and bodily torments. The condemned person is held by six men, while a seventh forces the adder's mouth onto the victim's skin. For obvious reasons, that particular snake is called the death adder by the Fenlanders.

## Settlement Organisation

The smallest Fenlander village has three families and the largest over a hundred and fifty individuals. Each village has a valkar (or valkara if female), a position similar to the village reeve. The valkar settles disputes, performs marriages, and directs the collective effort of the village. The position is held for life, although a few unpopular valkars have disappeared in the marsh. When the old valkar dies, the village's adult population gather to elect a new valkar, mimicking the clan succession councils of Kaldor.

This is usually a formality, as the old valkar will usually nominate a successor that is acceptable to the village.

A valkar will appoint others of the village to positions of responsibility, such as head weaver or hunter, sabar builder or kohl distiller. There is less formality about these appointments than might be supposed. The positions are often assumed by the most competent member of the village in that field. Only if there is a dispute will the valkar make a ruling as to who holds the position. Such disputes are rare, however, because the size of the villages is such that everyone knows everyone else, and all need to cooperate to survive.

About once every four or five years, more often for larger villages, an entire settlement moves. The resources of the surrounding marsh become depleted and a new location is sought. A decision to move a village cannot be made in isolation because the location chosen may affect another village. So a meeting of all valkars is held every Harvest Home festival to decide such things. Disputes between villages are also decided at these councils, although serious disputes can be settled more promptly if need be.

## Religion

Fenlanders are generally relaxed about the worship of the Lesser Gods, but most profess to follow Peoni. There are currently two Peonian ebasethe ministering to the spiritual needs of the Fenlanders and a reclusive reslava lives by the shore of a small lake in the southern arm of the Fens.

Starting on the first day of Azura, the Fenlanders begin the Harvest Home festival. They fast during daylight hours, and eat sparingly at night. No alcohol is consumed and the devout pray to Peoni. This continues for another three days, during which time huts are cleaned, aired, repaired and given a fresh coat of lime-wash. Boats, nets, fish traps and other gear is cleaned, mended and repaired. On the fourth day, the whole population travels to a point about midway between the two arms of the Fens. Greetings are made, agreements reached, food is prepared and everyone waits for dusk.

As the sun is sinking in the west, the Fenlanders eat a carefully prepared sab shoot and give thanks to Peoni for the bounties of the marsh and their continued freedom. When the last ray of direct sunlight vanishes, the people give a great shout and the party begins. The many dishes prepared during the day are eaten with gusto, new kegs of kohl are broached and sampled and the Fenlanders concentrate on having a good time, the last before winter.

## Present Relations

The existence of the Fenlanders is not well known, especially by the nobles of Kaldor, although rumours abound. Each settlement is self-sufficient in most things, but will trade with other Fenlander villages for goods they cannot produce themselves. If the goods cannot be manufactured or obtained from other settlements, they must be obtained from outside the fens by a trader.

Fenlanders trade for goods they cannot produce for themselves, such as pottery, woollen cloth and especially metal goods of all kinds. In return, they bring reed mats and baskets, herbs, and small kegs of kohl. Fenlander traders avoid populated areas such as Kiban, Shebra and Fisen, visiting instead the small riverside villages of Kaldor between these towns. Their trading is done in secret, and since the Kaldoran villagers profit greatly from the goods the Fenlanders bring, they have a vested interest in maintaining the secret.

To ensure their anonymity is continued, Fenlanders make discreet inquiries about outlaws who flee to the marsh. If the outlaw is being pursued vigorously by a noble, or the crime committed by them was particularly violent, chances are the outlaw will be found drifting face down in the reeds on the eastern bank of the Nephen River, having died from a snake bite.