Azenomei

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www.dyingearth.com/violetcusps.htm

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Map of Azenomei surrounds: Sarah Wroot.

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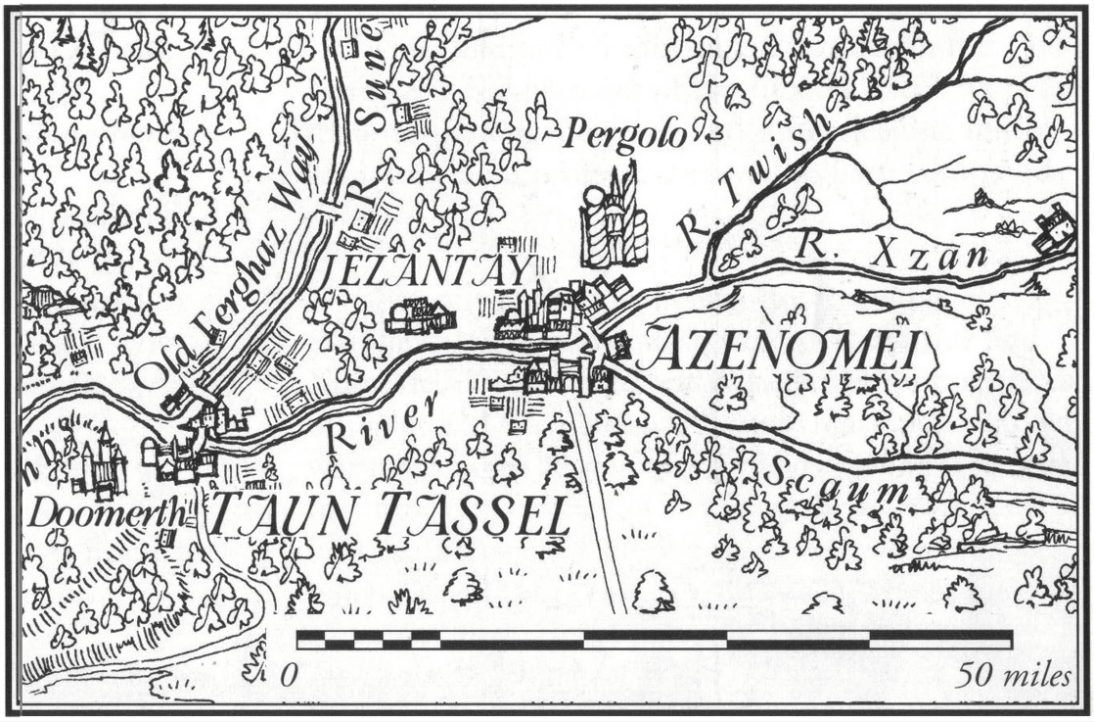

Introduction

As many readers will know, Jack Vance first introduced Azenomei to the world of fantasy in the 'Eyes of the Overworld'. In this story we glimpse "a town old beyond memory, notable now only for its fair". Few other clear facts remain: Cugel regarded the citizens of Azenomei as 'listless'; and it supports establishments that offer fine accommodations, expert crafters, sustenances of quality, and elegant garments (to those with the means to afford them); terraces overlook the river, and the local buildings are noticeably ancient. Additionally, the region is so safe that a glass-blower is able to operate a workshop on the banks of the river some distance outside town, and on at least one side of the community rolling hills stretch into the distance.

Other ideas may be ascertained through reading the description of Cugel's few wanderings through both the fair and the town. Nobody tries to arrest, or even caution, him for his dubious fairground sales of talismans that are 'not obviously useless', nor harasses him when he much later returns to the location dressed in travel-torn gear. A final important note is that no forces of authority interact with Cugel over the fact that he has ousted Iucounu the Laughing Magician from his manse, nor even when he displays said magician in a magical container during a 'Carnival of Grotesques'.

Thus, we can sensibly assume that Azenomei is used to peace and quiet, that thieves and vagabonds are few, that law and order is low-key though nonetheless relatively assured, and that the citizens are indeed used to a quiet life. The only hint of unpleasantness is that Fianosther claims that Cugel has sited his market stall on the position of the 'old gibbet'. Though the author of this article interprets this remark as typical Vancian humor at the expense of Cugel, this certainly implies that a gibbet once existed at Azenomei, and suggests that one may still.

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Since the early days of those original stories, Pelgrane Press has released further role-playing material hinting at the nature of Azenomei. The author has done his best to incorporate (or at least not to contradict) these extensions. We continue to refer to Azenomei as a town for two reasons. Firstly, this is how Vance originally describes it. Secondly, Cugel refers to it as a city only once, and then in a response to Derwe Coreme's question about cities in Almery – thus he may well be including large towns in his response, simply because actual cities are few and far between.

Town Overview

Azenomei is situated on the banks of the wide and meandering River Scaum at its juncture with the Xzan River, which arrives at a gentle angle from the northeast. Together these lively watercourses now form the Scaum Major as it is locally known, and this greater flow continues westwards towards Kaiin and the ocean. The buildings of Azenomei are situated on gentle terraces on the north side of the Scaum, and along the south bank on land that slopes more sedately upwards away from the river. These exquisitely gabled structures are, by and large, rambling fabrications of historical origins and notable style. In short, they have survived from a time when artistry was prized in great building works, and when longevity was considered intrinsic in reputable construction practices.

This is not to say that each and every building in Azenomei still retains its majesty of old, rather only that their original quality has meant that they have lasted the test of time with comparative resilience. Those folk of wealth in the town are able to keep their residences in reasonable condition, and this includes those properties whose landlords rent them out to numerous lesser tenants. Those of lesser incomes of course maintain their houses as best they can, being possessed of normal civic pride. However, they are not necessarily able to apply coats of paint or creosote as often as they would like, nor replace every single fallen tile in a timely fashion, nor see to each and every other fiddling small repair with the expedience they might otherwise prefer. Nonetheless, unlike Kaiin, Azenomei maintains a cadre of competent builders, who delight in restoring the buildings of this once great settlement, and this shows.

Despite the general civic pride a large class of lesser citizens lives comfortably enough but has little or no income spare. Such folk must resort to maintaining their own homes, and these structures (typically sheltered amongst the back streets away from the main thoroughfares) can present a hotchpotch of makeshift repairs. Additionally, it is inevitable that some of the magnificent structures of the town have failed to be maintained at all, and are now crumbling into ruin. Even so, these ivy-covered edifices add majesty to the town rather than detract from it, tucked away as they are behind the main roads of the settlement. Also, beyond the main boundary of the community are other ruins, evidencing as is common in this world, that many centuries ago the town once spread far wider than its current extent – and perhaps formerly deserved its occasional epithet as 'city'.

The folk of Azenomei are seen by some bon-vivants as 'listless', and yet in actuality they enjoy a high quality of life, both practical and social, especially compared to the squalid and desperate lives of the majority of the residents of Kaiin. Certainly, few in Azenomei enjoy the great riches of the nobles of Kaiin's Odkin Prospect, and none in Azenomei can boast anything like the wealth and privilege of the house of Kandive, but quality of life is not only about fiscal potency. Here in Azenomei the main streets are clean, criminal acts occur in only moderate frequency, and civic festivals are not marred by drunken mobs and clans of skilled cutpurses.

All of this is not to say that Azenomei is a town populated entirely by the righteous and enlightened. Azenomei is merely rather more refined and proportionately wealthy than Kaiin. It thus lacks the motivations of dire hardship that are unfortunately prevalent in that coastal metropolis; even though the larger settlement is only seven days brisk march away along the Scaum Trail (or only three days boating down the Scaum itself).

Outsiders typically find the town attractive and peaceful, with its architectural ambience, and the widely spaced houses allowing for much greenery and wild flowerbeds to grow alongside the streets. One can in fact wander through town using only the wide grassy laneways between the properties, should one so choose. Only the dullest of wits can fail to sense the resplendent beauty and ancient majesty of this place.

The residents in general are polite and welcoming to those of apparent good nature, but are not overly ebullient. In demeanor the average citizen of Azenomei is a quiet and restrained person, content to continue his or her business as their parents did before them and their grandparents before that.

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In these chaotic days, the folk of Azenomei value their quality of life. Only when overly ambitious criminals threaten their security do these simple folk come alive. In response to such occurrences their normally simmering civic pride leaps to the surface as everyone pulls together for mutual protection under the leadership of the brave constables.

Climate

Azenomei is warm and temperate. Spring is delightful, bringing back the many colorful birds that had departed to the south, and causing the deciduous trees in the nearby forests to leap back into full foliage. In the summer one can experience a succession of long hot days, though these may or may not be interspersed with overcast and rainy periods depending on the air masses moving in from the Melantine Gulf or the Songan Sea. In both Spring and Summer the local grasslands and hedgerows are resplendent with glorious yellow bilibobs that characterize this part of the world. During Fall, the trees take one wonderful hues of orange and brown, and rainy days become more common – although the temperatures remain clement right up until the start of winter. Winter itself is rarely overly harsh, although from time to time the snows can lie upon the town for a week or more.

Surrounding Region

Several miles away to the west and northwest of Azenomei is the Old Ferghaz Forest. Occasionally half-men have been known to enter its confines, and from there to predate on travelers along the Old Ferghaz Way itself. However, such attacks are few, although sensible folk never enter the forest, and even hunters and woodcutters venture only into its fringes – and then only during the hours of full sunlight. South of the town wild grasslands and small woodlands soon cover the rolling sward spanning the fifty or so miles to the hills that border Val Ombrio.

To the north and east of the settlement, rolling hills bound the courses of the Xzan and the Twish. These regions hold no significant settlements (except along the river edges themselves), and are considered unwise to travel indiscriminately. Nonetheless, few if any demi-human predators emerge from this wilderness to threaten the safety of Azenomei.

Northwest and southeast of the town are cultivated fields spread about the flatter land on which also stand the relics of buildings. These scattered ruins indicate that Azenomei was once even grander than it is now, but the land serves the current town much better – providing food and vegetables in great profusion.

Districts

Xzanside

Xzanside is the larger portion of the town, stretching upwards across the terraces to the north of the settlement, containing fully three-fifths of the buildings. Xzanside itself is split into three informal sub-districts: the Concourse (those buildings along the waterfront and those only a short distance behind); the Backs (the majority of buildings – stretching across the terraces); and the Upper Town (those buildings along the top of the hill, which include the Duchess' manse). The Upper Town contains a large proportion of wealthy homes, the Backs a large proportion of low-income residents, and the Concourse a large proportion of the merchant classes. However, districts are not divided according to income and social standing in the way that Kaiin is. The majority of Azenomei's commercial establishments are either on the Concourse or tucked away in the streets behind it. Typically they are rooms in the lower stories of large houses, and the owners or renters of the business will live in one of the apartments upstairs.

Scaumside

This section of the town is slightly larger than the Backs, but does not merit any subdivisions of its own, although it is sometimes referred to as the Lower Town. This is in the nature of a rivalry, as the richest citizens of Azenomei tend to live either in the Upper Town or back from the river in Scaumside.

The Fairground

Nestled in the arm of land formed by the junction of the Scaum and Xzan, the Fairground is not a district proper as only a few permanent buildings stand along the Xzan here. Nonetheless, it is considered a valid and valued part of the town, and several rich merchants maintain opulent residences along the riverbank.

Law and Order

Generally speaking Azenomei is considered a very safe place to live. Thieves and footpads occasionally operate on the trails outside of town, but half-men are rarely seen in these parts. (And when they are the local men-folk – especially the hunters and those who know magic – form posses to track these fiends down and eradicate them.) Of course, within the town itself burglary is not unknown, and neither, unfortunately, is mugging. Nonetheless, such things are not rife, and persons who travel in small groups and stay to the main streets confidently expect to avoid attack, even in the late evening.

A team of constables is employed to patrol the town and its borders, and these men are considered pillars of the community. Courteous to all newcomers (save perhaps the most destitute and felonious in appearance) when compared to Kaiin's vigils they are highly motivated and skilled. They are recognizable due to their gray tabards and small metal helms, and also carry either a billy-club (patrolmen) or a rapier (officers), with which they are at least reasonably proficient. They are empowered to request all visitors to deposit any large and obvious weapons with the Office of Constables. Such deposits gain a receipt, and the weapon may be collected as you leave town.

A public court tries all offenses, and capital punishment (via the new gibbet on the western edge of town) is meted out to murderers, those who rob with violence, and similar heinous crimes – such as theft of significant property from the town's wealthier residents. Lesser criminals are put to work on necessary street and building repairs, seconded to the Ethodea Hospice, or merely banished from the town precincts with nothing but the skin they were born in.

Technically one can appeal to the Duchess, but she rarely grants requests from suspected criminals even for an audience, though there have been exceptions.

Religions and Philosophies

At first glance, Azenomei is typical of larger settlements across the Dying Earth; as no over-riding philosophy or religion grips the inhabitants. Nonetheless, the folk of this town are relatively superstitious and pay passing respect to a number of ancient deities – although only one of them supports a small congregational service of adoration.

The most widely revered of the deities is Yelisea the Goddess of Fate, for she has small household shrines tucked away in many homes, typically in an alcove near the main door. However, her worship is in the nature of a superstition, as people will place small sacrifices (sweets, colored cloths, or flowers) there before departing on an errand of significance, starting a new project or going to meet a romantic interest.

Paphnis the Goddess of Earthly Beauty is also revered, although she has no shrines as such. Rather her name is evoked and certain ritual gesticulations made when one is preparing for a social engagement or hoping for the healing of an unsightly disfigurement. In such cases as the latter, sacrifices of beautiful objects are occasionally made - by burning them in a hearth.

Miamatta, the God of Justice has a statue and small shrine in the Town Hall (a large building across the road from the Crusty Loaf tavern), although only legal personnel beginning and starting important cases acknowledge this. (And in most cases such acknowledgement is little more than a ritual genuflection.)

Only Ethodea, the Goddess of Mercy, maintains active worship, and this is minimal in terms of worshippers. A small shrine to her exists within the town hospice, and the staff members regularly petition her for aid in assisting the patients to recover from illness or injury. One morning each week, the permanent staff perform an ancient ritual in her honor, and grateful former patients will often acknowledge her in the letters that accompany their donations.

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Fashions and Fripperies

The folk of Azenomei are by and large friendlier and better off than those who live in Kaiin. This means that the average person has more time and money to spend on clothes and accoutrements. Although the local obsession with clothing does immediately not appear to be paramount to a newcomer, the residents of Azenomei set great pride in their appearance. The various fashions come and go regularly, and those who lead the trends set great store on learning what is popular in Kaiin, almost before the Kaiinese do.

However, the folk of Azenomei do not slavishly follow the ways of Kaiin, but rather adapt the larger city's trends into their own unique milieu – thus creating a very different ambience of general attire. The people of Azenomei also consider it a sign of gaucheness to talk openly about what 'is in' and what 'is not'. Individuals prefer to maintain the pretence that their skilful grasp of fashion is a result of some innate knowledge. (Whereas it is normally a sign of frantic perusal of the fashion leaders walking the concourse, followed by expensive tailoring and/or long nights slaving over dye tubs and alteration tables in the parlor of one's home).

Not everyone can afford to involve themselves in this pursuit of style. The lowest earning third of society must make do with last season's cast-offs, and some simply choose to wear functional garb appropriate to a menial profession (or lack thereof). These folk are not treated with rude contempt, as the people of Azenomei enjoy a relaxed and egalitarian society, but quiet condescension is the order of the day.

Inhabitants

Contacts

Constable

"Welcome to our fine town. Here we carry our rapiers sheathed, and that large wooden club must be surrendered to the Office of Constables, lest you startle one of the citizens."

The constables of Azenomei are loyal and well paid. Though normal low-key corruption can and does occur amongst the lower ranks, the officers are by and large intelligent enough to avoid inveiglement. If you befriend a constable, and he sees no reason to suspect you of nefariousness, he might become a valuable source of information on the comings and goings of foreigners, plus any suspicious activities about town.

Craftsperson

"Please enter my humble workshop. We have all manner of items on display, and can often manufacture goods to order."

The quality crafters own their own workshops, or at least hire well-proportioned rooms. Usually they and their families live upstairs.

Itinerant Trader

"Roasted hedge-lark, sir? Fresh? Why only this morning it was sitting on a branch warbling its little head off."

Such folk are found in their droves around the fair ground on market days, but also range the Concourse, often arising early to try and obtain the best locations near (but not too near – lest it offend the constables) the primary establishments. If you establish a regular patronage with one of these, chances are that you can learn much about the folk of the town.

Laborer

"What did you use for the crossbeam then? Dear oh dear. No, that'll have to come out."

As mentioned earlier, the laborers of Azenomei are actually professional workers, although they vary in quality and reliability as they do elsewhere across the civilized world. The less industrious amongst them (in terms of regular labor) might well become available for highly profitable enterprises of a less than legal nature.

Member of the Nobility

"Give the little man a coin, for the pity of Ethodea."

The nobles of Azenomei, being far less wealthy than their counterparts in Kaiin lack the uniform ruthless avarice known in that city. Some members of the old families are snobbish in the extreme, and socialize only with those they consider their equals. Others, including the newly rich from mercantile enterprises - but also

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some from the old families, are respected members of society who assist with charitable acts and are unashamed to have friends (well at least acquaintances) from within the lower classes.

Servant

"Yes, haunch of mermelant, delivered before four and there'll be a few extra terces in it for you."
Many folk act as servants for the wealthier families, whether as formal butlers and maids or as simple cleaners and stable assistants. The more valued servants are far less likely to divulge secrets about their employers than the casual staff, though of course the senior servants are privy to more valuable information.

Squatter

"Sorry chum, we're full-up in here, besides - the ceiling starts to fall in when it rains. Try up the street, third house on the left just round the corner."
Although officially they don't exist, an underclass of squatters also dwells in Azenomei. They are typically itinerants from other parts of Almery or Ascolais (and occasionally further afield) or the newly adult children of local families who have left home for one reason or another. They support themselves through casual and seasonal labor, and have their own subculture. Many are artists or musicians, or at least hope to be one day. Sensibly they do not advertise their presence, but move quietly in a group into a less dilapidated old house in the Backs. The more persistent also effect basic repairs, and more than one communal house has been partially reclaimed in this way. Unless some kind of criminal activity is suspected, the constables usually leave them alone (except to collect a modest weekly 'donation' to the Constables' Benevolent Fund).

Store Owner

"Good morning to you. What can I interest you in today?"
Generally polite and obsequious to anyone that might be a genuine customer, the typical storeowner nonetheless shows short shrift to penniless drifters perusing their fine wares.

Street Sweeper

"Ere! Did you drop that? Pick it up and place it in that litter repository, and I'll refrain from calling the constables."
The street sweepers of Azenomei are more than just the handlers or stout brooms. They are a guild responsible for keeping the main thoroughfares clean and free from debris. Consequently as well as their brooms they have barrows and even sometimes a mermelant and small cart. They are employed and paid by the town council, but are not above receiving some extra funds for reporting any odd events they have seen or objects that might have found.

Personages

Duchess Amisaulde

"Pour me a glass of Viliyat Ordinaire and send in the dancers; I desire to be entertained."
Amisaulde rules Azenomei at least technically, although she rarely interferes directly in local affairs and is more of a figurehead of civic identity. That is to say she opens the fair, takes part in parades, judges contests, presents awards, and the like. Her position is a hereditary one, passed one for so many generations that nobody can remember if any previous Duchess (or Duke, such as her father) used to be more closely involved in governing the town. She also occasionally hosts lavish costume parties, during which time she passes incognito amongst her guests, indulging her sensuality and sense of humor in equal proportions. Amisaulde is known to be a magician of some note, and at least 140 years old (though she looks no older than her mid-40s). Since her last husband died 20 years ago she has not remarried, but reputedly maintains a regular procession of bedchamber attendants. In practice she leaves the ruling of Azenomei and its surrounding hamlets to her town council. When attending civic engagements a small squad of her gaudily-dressed pike-men usually accompanies her. These fellows train regularly within the grounds of her dwelling, but have never been known to engage in combat on her behalf. (Such has never been necessary, as on the very rare occurrences she has been threatened her spells have quickly solved the difficulty.)
Ratings: Persuade (Charming) ~+3, Rebuff (Penetrating) 2~, Attack (Finesse) ~, Defense (Intuition) ~+4, Health 9, Magic (Forceful) ~+2, Appraisal 10, Athletics ~, Concealment ~, Driving 3, Etiquette 15, Gambling ~, Imposture 8, Pedantry 12, Perception 11, Riding 7, Scuttlebutt 6, Seduction 12, Stealth 4, Stewardship 4, Wherewithal 9.

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