

THE CITIES BENEATH

The Underground Cities of Cappadocia · A History & Game Master's Compendium

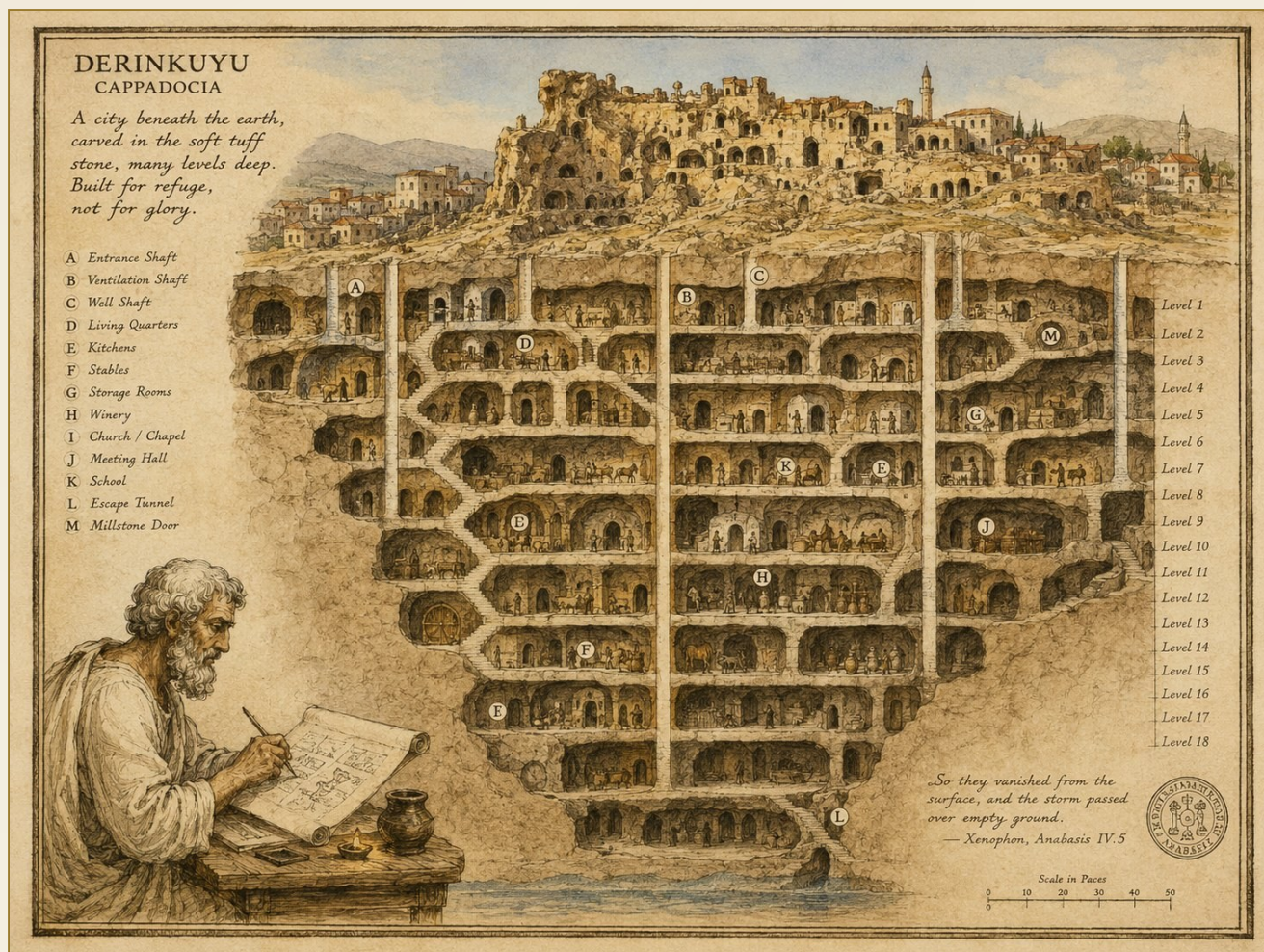
"Every dungeon ever drawn asks the same question: why would anyone go down into the dark?"

This one asks the harder one — what was so terrible up here that down was the safer road?"

ON THE NATURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This is the fourth in a series that takes a real or remembered underground place and makes it ready for the table. Hawara has all but vanished; the Minotaur's maze was always half myth. Cappadocia is different — you can still climb down into it today. Beneath the volcanic hills of central Anatolia lie whole cities carved into the rock: Derinkuyu, Kaymakli, and more than two hundred others.

And here the usual logic of the dungeon turns inside out. People did not avoid these depths — they fled into them. The dungeon was not the danger; it was the shield. The same instinct echoes down the centuries, into the metro-tunnels and sealed vaults of modern fiction, but it was old already when Xenophon found people living below ground in 401 BCE. This handout is built around that inversion — and around a single idea a Game Master can mine for a whole campaign: *the same place can be a refuge and a tomb, depending only on which side of the door you stand.*



A CITY BENEATH THE EARTH

Cappadocia was shaped by ancient volcanic activity: ash and lava settled into *tuff*, a rock soft enough to carve with hand tools yet stable enough to hold vaulted halls and stairwells. Into that rock, people cut homes, churches, monasteries, and entire settlements. Above ground the region is famous for its fairy chimneys and cave-churches; below ground it becomes something else entirely.

The greatest of the underground cities is Derinkuyu. It descends roughly eighty-five metres through as many as eighteen levels – only about half of them open today – and is thought to have sheltered as many as twenty thousand people, together with their livestock and food stores. Within are stables, granaries, wells, ventilation shafts, a chapel, even a school. Likely begun by the Phrygians and vastly expanded by Christian communities in the Byzantine era as a refuge from raid and war, it was a *designed* refuge – built so a whole town could vanish from the surface and live below for weeks at a time.

Not One City, but a Region

Derinkuyu was not unique. Cappadocia holds more than two hundred underground settlements – Kaymaklı is the other famous one – and a tunnel believed to run some nine kilometres is said to link the two. The geology made it possible, the politics made it useful, and repeated centuries of danger made it necessary. This is the lesson worth stealing: the dungeon is not a single strange place dropped into the world. It is part of an *ecosystem*.

From Xenophon's Anabasis, Book IV – the Athenian general, marching home through the Anatolian highlands in 401 BCE.

The houses here were underground, Xenophon writes, the entrance no wider than the mouth of a well, but opening into broad rooms below. Ramps had been dug so the animals could be driven down; the people went down by ladder. Inside were goats, sheep, cattle and fowl with their young, all stalled and foddered under the earth, and stores of wheat and barley, and barley-wine standing in great bowls, drunk through reeds.

He does not call it a marvel. To him it was simply how these people lived – and how, when armies passed, they were not found. Four hundred years before the first chapel was cut at Derinkuyu, the idea was already old: when the world above turns dangerous, you make a second world below.

— after Xenophon, Anabasis IV.5, c. 401 BCE

Why Go 'Underground? Not Treasure – Survival.

This is the inversion at the heart of the handout. In a normal dungeon, the party goes down because something valuable or deadly waits below. In Derinkuyu, people went down because the danger was *above* them – raiders, soldiers, persecution. Seal the entrance, guard the water, breathe through the shafts, and wait until the storm on the surface passes. The underground city was never the threat. It was the answer to one.



DESIGNED FOR DEFENSE, BUILT LIKE A MACHINE

Derinkuyu shows how practical defensive architecture can be more interesting than any spike-pit or magic rune. Many passages are narrow enough to force movement in single file. Entrances were easy to miss. Great circular millstone doors — half a tonne of rock — could be rolled across a corridor and barred, and crucially could only be worked *from the inside*. The wells were sunk so the surface could not foul them, and over fifty ventilation shafts kept air moving to the lowest levels, doubling as those very wells. Sound itself was a system: a voice or a footfall carried along the shafts from level to level, so the city could pass warning through solid rock.

The more you read of it, the less it feels like a maze and the more it feels like a machine — every part with a function. Stables sit near the top because beasts cannot be driven deep. Granaries exist because no refuge works without food. Chapels exist because people do not stop being people merely because they are hiding. And this is the clearest lesson for the table: *function creates atmosphere*. A room labelled “storage” is dull; a room of sealed grain jars, broken amphorae, rat-holes and claw-marks by the door is already a story. A shaft is not a hole in the ceiling — it can carry smoke, whispers, poison, or the sound of someone moving on another level.



Note for the Game Master: If you are hiding underground with hundreds of people, the real enemy is not a goblin patrol. It is panic, thirst, smoke, disease, betrayal, and time. Let the place begin as safety and slowly become danger — that inversion is the single most powerful tool this whole handout gives you.

Run it in three movements. **First, make it home.** Open with warmth, not threat: lamp-light, the smell of barley-bread, children underfoot, a chapel murmuring, the great stone rolled shut behind the party so they feel safe. Let them relax. A refuge only becomes a trap for people who first believed it was a refuge. **Second, turn one screw.** Not a monster — a number. The water runs cloudy. A shaft stops drawing air. The bread is short by a day. Nothing attacks; something simply fails, and the players feel the rock close in. **Third, let people break before the walls do.** The first real danger should wear a familiar face — a neighbour who hoards, a warden who seals a door with people still behind it, a council that votes to surface too soon. Underground, every solution costs something else: seal a corridor and you save one section while you smother another; spend the water and you must climb toward the enemy to find more.

Three small techniques carry most of the dread. **Make depth emotional** — name the level the party is on, and let every staircase down feel like losing a little more sky. **Make sound do the scaring** — the shafts carry everything, so let the players hear the threat (digging, weeping, a bellow with no direction) long before they see it. And **put the clock on the table** — track Air, Water, and Nerve where the players can watch them tick, and let their own choices move the dials. Reach for a creature only when the place itself has already done the work.

RUNNING THE REFUGE

Verticality is the heart of it. Most game dungeons are flat maps with stairs between them; a refuge like this one is measured in *depth*. Every level down, the surface is farther away, the air is more precious, and escape is less certain. Use that — let the descent carry the dread.

The Three Depths

- ◆ **The Threshold Levels (1-2).** Stables, gatehouse, the great rolling doors, stores kept near the top because beasts cannot be driven deep. Where the city meets the world — and where any assault lands first. CR 1-4.
- ◆ **The Living Levels (middle).** Homes, kitchens, cisterns, the chapel, the council hall, the school. The whole community — and all of its politics. CR 3-7.
- ◆ **The Deep & the Wells (lowest).** The water, the oldest stores, the sealed passages, and the rumoured tunnel to the next city. Safest from the enemy above; worst for air, light, and nerve. CR 5-12+.

The Real Enemies

Reach for these before you reach for monsters: panic that empties a level in the dark, thirst when a well is lost, smoke down a shaft, disease in crowded rooms, betrayal from within, and time, which beats everyone.

Who Holds the City

Faction	What They Control
Wardens of the Doors	The rolling stones. They decide who is sealed in — and who is shut out.
Keepers of the Well	The water, and so everyone. The quietest power in the city.
The Air-Wardens	The shafts. They know every sound the rock carries and every place smoke could come down.
The Stores-Masters	The grain and the oil. In a long siege, the ledger is a weapon.
The Council	The one question that matters: when, if ever, it is safe to climb back up.

Whoever holds the doors, the water, or the air holds the city — no crown required.

THE MIRROR: HOLDING A CITY, AND TAKING ONE

Here is the idea worth a whole campaign. Every method of *defending* a city below ground is also a method of *attacking* one — the same doors, shafts, wells and chokepoints, simply read from the other side. Run the party as defenders of their own refuge in one arc; then send them into a fallen neighbour-city to drive out whatever took it, and watch every trick turn around in their hands.

The System	From Inside — Holding the City	From Outside — Taking One
The Doors	Roll the great stones shut and bar them from within; one defender can hold a sealed corridor.	Find the single door that can be forced, or the concealed entrance the builders kept secret.
The Shafts	Guard the ventilation, and listen — sound through the shafts is your early-warning net.	Block the shafts to choke them, or send smoke and fire down and let the draught do the killing.
The Well	Protect the water above all; a guarded well outlasts any siege.	Seize or foul the well. You need not fight them if thirst will.
The Chokes	Defend the single-file tunnels; three can hold a level against an army.	The same three can <i>plug</i> a level and wait — bottle them in and starve the section.
The Ears	Read the dark by sound; know where every footfall on every level is coming from.	Move silent, or feed them false sounds; the rock that warns them can deceive them.
Bait & Time	Ration, sit tight, and wait the enemy out; time is on the side that planned for it.	Lure the occupant up into the light with bait on the surface — then take the empty dark.

WHY THE PARTY IS HERE

Scenario	The Situation	What the Party Must Do
The Sealed Door	The party is below when the stones roll shut and the siege begins. They cannot get out — and neither can the rival group sheltering on the next level.	Survive the wait. Broker, outlast, or master the rivals before thirst, smoke, or panic does the enemy's work for them.
Masters of the Well	The factions that hold the water, the air, and the stores no longer trust one another. The city is one accusation away from civil war underground.	Broker the systems back together — or seize the ones that matter. Whoever controls the well controls the siege.
The New Tunnel	Diggers break through into raw, unmapped cave systems beneath the lowest level — a possible escape, a new water source, or a way in for something else.	Explore the breach before the enemy or the city's own fear does. Map it, claim it, or seal it.
The Enemy Above	Marauders, a warband, or a dragon ranges the surface. The refuge is a peaceable people who will not — or cannot — fight.	Be the violence they won't commit: scout the threat, hold the doors, and end the siege on their behalf.
The Breach	The outer door is forced, or worse, something is already inside — moving level to level, using the city's own shafts and chokes against its people.	Hunt it through the dark with the defenders' own toolkit, before it reaches the Deep and the wells.
The Silent Neighbour	The sister-city has gone quiet. No warning came through the linking tunnel. Something holds it now — a goblin tribe, a dragon, worse.	Scout what became of the neighbour, and clear it — by the mirror: block the shafts, foul the well, bait it out, hold the chokes.

AIR, WATER, AND TIME — AN OPTIONAL SIEGE RULE

The real antagonist of a refuge is not a creature but a set of dwindling resources. Track three clocks; advance them as the fiction demands. They work from *both* sides of the mirror — defenders manage their clocks, attackers attack them.

Air. A sealed city breathes through its shafts. Block one, light a fire at its mouth, or push too many people too deep, and the Air clock advances. At its end: the lowest level becomes unbreathable until a shaft is cleared.

Water. The well is life. Foul it, lose it, or simply run the siege long, and the Water clock advances. At its end: thirst forces a sortie to the surface — or a descent into the unmapped deep to find more.

Nerve. Hunger, darkness, rumour and a body at the door all advance the Nerve clock. At its end: a faction breaks — opens a door it should not, hoards the stores, or turns on a neighbour.

Reading it from outside. To take a held city, the attackers simply *advance the defenders' clocks* on purpose: smoke a shaft (Air), foul the well (Water), leave a corpse where it will be found (Nerve). The siege is won when any clock fills.

PRESSURES OF THE DEEP CITY (D8)

d8	The Pressure	Running It · What It Means
1	Smoke in the Shaft. Air on the lower levels begins to foul; someone above has lit fires at a ventilation mouth.	An Air-clock threat. Which of the fifty shafts is it? Draught and sound are the clues. Block or clear the right one before the Deep chokes — and find who signalled the enemy to it.
2	The Fouled Cistern. A body — or worse — is found in a secondary well.	A Water-clock threat and a whodunit at once. Sabotage, accident, or sickness? Suspicion alone can crack a fragile truce between factions.
3	The Jammed Stone. One of the great rolling doors will not seat; a section cannot be sealed.	A chokepoint fails exactly when it is needed. An engineering check under pressure — or hold the gap with bodies while it is fixed.
4	A Voice in the Rock. Sound carries through the shafts: weeping, digging, a tongue no one knows.	Trapped neighbour, enemy sapper, or something in the unmapped deep? A mystery the party must trace level by level by ear.
5	The Parley at the Gate. Someone above asks to talk through the door.	Terms, lies, or a stall while sappers work? A social scene with a hidden timer running behind it.
6	The Ration Reckoning. The stores are shorter than the ledger claims.	A Nerve-clock threat — theft, miscount, or a faction hoarding. How the party handles it sets the whole city's mood.
7	The New Draught. A fresh crack breathes cold air from an unmapped tunnel below the lowest level.	Escape route, water source, or a way in for something else. The exploration hook — map it, claim it, or seal it before the enemy finds it too.
8	The Breach at the Threshold. They are through the outer door.	The siege turns hot. Hold the single-file choke, or fall back, seal the next stone, and abandon a level to buy the deep ones time.

Clearing a Taken City — the Mirror in Play

Seal or smoke the shafts. Block the ventilation and the occupant chokes; or burn green wood at a shaft-mouth and let the draught carry it down.

Take the well. Hold or foul the water and time fights on your side, exactly as it once fought for the defenders.

Hold the chokes & bait the surface. The same single-file tunnels now bottle the enemy in — and whatever lairs below came for prey, so offer it above and draw it into the light.

Connection to Lathmar

In the Lathmar campaign, the cities beneath are where a frightened people once fled a danger on the surface — and where Lathmar's corruption now seeps up to meet them from below. A refuge built to keep the world *out* becomes a trap when the threat begins coming from *deeper down*, and the doors made to bar the surface cannot be reopened from within fast enough.

It is also, almost exactly, the story of Lathmar's Deep Elves. They did not build their underground city — they *took* one. In the First Dwarven-Elven War, a Wood-Elven ruling pair pursued the Dwarves into the dark, broke into their stronghold, and annihilated the Silverhammer clan in their own halls; then they settled the conquered city and never climbed back into the sun. Across the centuries since, they have *held* that stolen city against all comers, growing pale, broad, and great-eyed in the eternal night. They are the Mirror made flesh — attackers who became defenders, a people for whom “taking a city” and “holding it for three hundred years” are the same long story. Drop them into *The Silent Neighbour*, and the question “what holds the sister-city now?” has a cold and ancient answer: something that once stood exactly where the party now stands, and made the dark its own.

Campaign Note: *The Cities Beneath* run from a single tense siege-night to a campaign of 8–12 sessions, from Level 1+. *The Air, Water, and Time* rule pairs naturally with Lathmar's guild system — one guild may be hired to hold a refuge while another is paid to break into the sister-city that fell, each turning the very same tools against the other. For more about Lathmar and its own history and lore, visit [Lathmar: The Fallen Depths](#).