

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

The Temple-Pyramids of Mesoamerica · A Game Master's Compendium in Two Eras

*"Every other temple was built to be looked up to.
This one was built to be climbed — and beneath it, to be descended.
The gods keep the summit. The truth keeps the root."*

ON THE NATURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This is the third in a series that makes a real or remembered underground place ready for the table. The first two kept to the Old World — Hawara's vanished maze and the Minotaur's labyrinth. This time it crosses an ocean. The temple-pyramids of the Americas are often likened to those of Egypt because both are vast and ancient — but the comparison misleads. An Egyptian pyramid mostly hides a dead king inside a mountain of stone. Many Mesoamerican pyramids were the opposite: not containers for the dead but stages for the living — sacred mountains raised at the heart of working cities, their most important spaces set in the open at the summit, above the plazas where the whole people watched ritual unfold.

That gives a Game Master two very different dungeons in one place, and this compendium runs both. Above, the pyramid is a vertical society you must climb and *earn* — merchants at the foot, priests and nobles higher up, and at the peak a shrine where a god may truly reside. Below, an older tunnel runs down past offerings into a cave that was the underworld made architecture. Play it at the city's height, alive with festival and intrigue; or play it in our own present, when a research team breaks a sealed door and learns that the builders were not speaking in metaphor. Power above. Truth below. A threshold between.



NOT A TOMB, BUT A SACRED MOUNTAIN

When modern players hear “pyramid,” they picture Egypt: a sealed tomb, narrow shafts, a dead ruler, traps. Many Mesoamerican pyramids worked the other way. They were temple platforms — artificial mountains lifting living ritual above the city, their key spaces visible on top, not buried within. Death was not absent (Palenque’s Temple of the Inscriptions holds the tomb of the Maya lord K’inich Janaab’ Pakal), but the rule held broadly: these were living ritual machines, not graves. The dungeon, then, need not begin behind a locked door. It can begin with a working temple, a city watching from below, and a priesthood that knows more about the foundations than it admits.

Under, Inside, or Around?

Documentaries flatten everything into “tunnels beneath the pyramid.” The truth is richer. At Teotihuacán, a real ancient cave-tunnel runs beneath the Pyramid of the Sun to a cloverleaf of chambers, tied to myths of emergence, water, and the underworld — the pyramid may have been raised to honour the cave, not the reverse. Beneath the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, a deliberately sealed tunnel led to chambers heavy with offerings and strange reflective earth: not a service corridor but a *controlled descent into the underworld*. At Cholula, by contrast, the famous kilometres of tunnels are mostly modern — bored by archaeologists through the body of the mountain. So the sacred space may be a cave below, a chamber within, a later excavation, or — often — nearby caves, springs, and openings that were the true underworld all along.

For the table, that variety is a gift. A temple complex is not one map but many, joined by ritual logic: a surface city, a ceremonial pyramid, buried earlier construction phases, water-caves, sealed tunnels, and a symbolic underworld. The player does not merely walk through rooms. The player descends through *meaning*.

From the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the K’iche’ Maya — of the Hero Twins’ descent into Xibalba, the underworld.

The road went down, the tellers say, to where four roads met — one white, one red, one black, one yellow — and the black road took them to Xibalba, the place of fear. There the Lords of the Underworld sat in council: One Death and Seven Death, and beside them the lords of blood, of pus, and of bone.

And the way was made of ordeals, each a house. The Dark House, where no light was. The Cold House, full of rattling hail. The Jaguar House, loud with hunger. The House of Fire, and the House of Bats, where the blades hung waiting. To pass was not to fight but to outwit — to know each house, and to answer it rightly.

— after the Popol Vuh, of the descent into Xibalba

[Later hand: “Build your underworld as houses of ordeal, not corridors of monsters.”]



Setting One

THE LIVING MOUNTAIN

The temple is in use. To reach the god, you must earn the climb.

THE CLIMB IS THE DUNGEON

Set the game at the city's height and the pyramid is not a ruin to loot but a society to ascend. Its tiers are a vertical map of the social order: at the foot, the markets and the merchants; above them the artisans and the warrior orders; higher still the priests and the nobles; and at the summit, the shrine where — on the right day, in the right hands — a god may truly be present. You do not walk to the top. You *earn* each step. Guards, customs, and gatekeepers turn back anyone without standing, and the higher you go, the more it costs to be allowed. This is a dungeon of permission, not of locked doors.

And all the while, a second way runs the other direction. Beneath the public stair, an old tunnel descends past offerings into the cavern where the first, darker version of the god was worshipped — the truth the bright summit was built to cover. The ambitious, the desperate, and the heretical can try to skip the climb and go *down* instead. Below, the price is not standing. It is something worse.



EARNING THE ASCENT — AN OPTIONAL RULE

You cannot simply walk to the summit. Track the party's Standing at each tier of the mountain; to pass a gate, their Standing must meet its price, or the gatekeepers turn them back — and a party caught forcing a tier is not merely refused but marked.

Standing per Tier. Each level of the mountain is its own gate with its own price. Standing won at the foot means little among the priests; every tier must be earned in its own coin.

Earning It. Not bought with money alone: a service rendered, a gift fitting the tier, a contest or ordeal passed, a patron's word, a rite correctly observed. The terraces value arms, the priests value knowledge, the nobles value blood and politics.

Losing It. A broken custom, a profaned space, a spilled secret, or a fallen patron can cost Standing — and a party marked as *profane* is hunted through the tiers, not merely refused at them.

The Summit, or the Root. The shrine cannot be stormed before the city answers; it is earned. The only other way up is, perversely, *down* — through the sealed tunnel, where Standing means nothing and the older god keeps a different, hungrier ledger.

The Tiers of the Ascent

- ◆ **The Foot — Market.** Traders, porters, money-changers, foreign envoys. Anyone may walk here. Rumour, contact, and the first toll-keepers.
- ◆ **Lower Terraces — Artisans & Warriors.** Featherworkers, masons, the soldier-orders. Passage bought with usefulness or arms.
- ◆ **Upper Terraces — Priests & Scribes.** Calendar-keepers and diviners, keepers of the rites — and divided over what lies below. Earned by service, knowledge, or sponsorship.
- ◆ **High Terrace — Nobles.** Patronage, blood, and politics. Few climb here uninvited and leave well.
- ◆ **The Summit — The Shrine.** Where the god is met. Reached only by the proven, on the right day, with the right offering.

Who Guards Each Step

Faction	What They Are
The Market Wardens	Toll-keepers and petty officials at the foot — the easiest gate, the widest eyes.
The Warrior Orders	The soldier-societies of the terraces; passage for the useful or the proven.
The Priesthood (Divided)	Keepers of the rites above — split between those who tend the bright summit and those who know, and fear or serve, what is below.
The Noble Houses	Patrons and rivals of the high terrace; their favour is a ladder and a noose.
The God at the Summit	Present or not, by the day; the one audience the whole climb is for.

Power Above, Truth Below. *This is the design key. Keep the two axes in tension: the public religion shines at the peak, the older truth waits at the root, and the party must choose which they pursue. Make each cost what the other does not — the climb costs patience, service, and standing; the descent costs safety, certainty, and perhaps the soul.*

WHY YOU CLIMB

Hook	The Situation	What the Party Must Do
The Audience	A patron needs a message, a plea, or a bargain carried to the god at the summit on the next holy day.	Earn the climb, tier by tier, before the day passes — and decide what to do if the god answers.
The Stolen Offering	A sacred object is taken from a mid-tier shrine; the theft will be blamed on a faction and spark a purge.	Recover it and read the politics, before the wrong people are offered for a crime they did not commit.
The Heretic Priest	A priest of the upper terrace secretly preaches the older god below.	Expose him, protect him, or descend far enough to learn whether he is right.
The Foreign Envoy	The party escorts — or impersonates — an envoy who must be received at a tier far above their station.	Bluff, earn, or buy the ascent without being unmasked as profane.
The Sacrifice	Someone the party loves is to be offered at the summit at the festival's peak.	The only way to reach them is up, through every gate, in time.
The Door Below	A patron does not want the summit at all. He wants the sealed tunnel opened.	Go down while the city looks up — and find out why the bright god was built to cover the dark one.

ON THE MOUNTAIN (D8)

d8	The Moment	Running It · What It Means
1	The Festival Crowd. The plaza fills; the rites begin.	Movement slows, but anonymity is easy. A chance to slip a gate unseen — or to be swept along toward the altar with everyone else.
2	The Wrong Courtesy. The party breaches a tier's custom unknowing.	Recover with grace (a check) or lose Standing and draw the gatekeepers' eyes. Each tier has manners the last did not.
3	The Patron's Offer. A noble or priest offers a leg up the mountain.	Standing, freely given — for a service that will come due higher up, at the worst possible moment.
4	The Omen. Diviners read a sign in smoke, bird, or blood.	The day's rites change: a gate that was open closes, or one long shut swings wide. The calendar rules the mountain.
5	The Rival Climbers. Another party is ascending too, by other means.	Envoys, schemers, or adventurers racing for the same summit. Ally, outpace, or sabotage — and watch your own back.
6	The Marked One. The party is recognised as out of place, or profane.	The warrior orders begin to shadow them. Standing must be restored, or the climb becomes a flight.
7	The Hidden Stair. A servant reveals a back-route between tiers.	It skips a gate — but it passes something not meant to be seen, and knowing it makes the party complicit.
8	The God's Regard. High on the mountain, for a moment, the party feels watched from the summit.	Whatever they do next is “seen.” The priesthood will know by morning — and so, perhaps, will the thing below.



Setting Two

THE MODERN DESCENT

The temple is sealed and forgotten — until a research team opens the door.

THE DOOR THAT WAS SEALED

Set the game in our own present and the sacred mountain becomes a perfect frame for cosmic horror. A research team — archaeologists, a university expedition, a corporate survey — breaks a tunnel that has been sealed for centuries. At first it is wonderful: pottery, pigment, offerings, bone, the staged descent the builders left exactly as the old texts promised. Then the wonder curdles. The measurements stop matching the surface. A sealed doorway shows up in different places on different scans. A passage that should end beneath the pyramid keeps going — and leads somewhere else.

This is where the Cthulhu key turns. The horror needs no monster at the mouth of the tunnel; it begins with a worse discovery — that the ancient builders were not being symbolic. The underworld they mapped was real, the houses of ordeal were not allegory, and the thing the bright summit was raised to hold *down* is still down there: patient, and no longer entirely sealed. What you dig up is one question. What you wake is another. Where the passage truly leads is the one that ends careers — and minds.



THE DESCENT THAT SHOULD NOT WORK

Run Setting Two cold and clinical at first — clipboards, head-lamps, lecture-hall confidence — and let the architecture do the dismantling. The dungeon's weapon is not claws but *wrongness*: space that does not add up, a map that lies, a way back that is no longer where it was left.

The Map Lies. Keep a hidden clock, **Unraveling**. Raise it whenever the team meets an impossibility — a corridor longer inside than out, a door on the wrong wall, a chamber that returns, a depth the instruments deny.

The Space Breaks. Low, and only the instruments disagree — unease, an argument, a re-measure. Higher, the way back changes: a known route ends in raw rock, or in a house of ordeal from the old descent. At its peak, the passage opens fully onto the elsewhere the builders truly mapped, and there is no simple climb back to the floodlights.

Minds Before Walls. Track the team's nerve beside the clock; the geometry breaks people before it breaks the way out. The first to crack is rarely the weakest — it is the one who trusted the measurements most.

Closing It. Unraveling eases only by re-sealing what was opened, by performing the old rites the builders left as *instructions* rather than decoration, or by giving the descent what the houses of ordeal demand. Force does nothing. The dark keeps a ledger too.

What Comes Through

Decide early how literal your underworld is. At the mild end, the team is haunted by the place and barely escapes with its mind. At the far end, something the builders named is rising through the very route the rites once held shut — not a beast to be shot but a presence the architecture was a *lock* against. The summit's bright god was always the public face; the thing below is the older worship the city replaced and buried. Waking it is not a boss fight. It is the discovery that the lock was the only thing holding. Three parties move through this version: the Expedition (scholars and a sponsor with motives, the first to fracture); the Locals and the Old Rites (those who knew the door should stay shut, and remember the instructions as ritual); and the Thing Below (mapped, patient, and no longer entirely sealed).

WHY YOU DIG

Hook	The Situation	What the Party Must Do
The Sealed Tunnel	A sponsor funds the opening of a deliberately sealed offering-tunnel beneath the temple.	Be first to what's inside — before a rival team, or before the story gets out and the site is closed.
The Missing Team	A previous expedition went silent below; the maps they sent back do not agree with one another.	Go in to find them — and find why the same corridor was three different lengths in three reports.
The Reflective Cache	Strange reflective earth and staged offerings fill the tunnel; a collector or agency will pay to remove them.	Extract the cache. Removing it is the mistake — the offerings were holding something in place.
The Scholar's Obsession	An academic insists the houses of ordeal are literal and must be entered “correctly.”	Humour them or stop them — before they open the last door <i>right</i> .
The Sickness Above	Since the dig began, the town above sickens: dreams, disappearances, a wrongness in the dark.	Trace it down to what was unsealed, and decide whether it can be closed again.
The Thing That Got Out	Something already came up the tunnel and is loose above.	Track it back down to where it came from — into the geometry that should not be.

THE DIG GOES WRONG (D8)

d8	The Event	Running It · What It Means
1	The Measurements Disagree. Tape and laser give different lengths for one hall.	+Unraveling. The team argues; someone re-measures, and gets a third figure. The instruments are not broken — the hall is.
2	The Door That Moved. A doorway photographed on the east wall is now on the west.	Only the photos prove it was ever otherwise — and someone quietly deletes them. +Unraveling, and a crack in trust.
3	The Cold That Rattles. A chamber answers the old Cold House: hail-cold, a sound like rattling teeth.	Instruments fail; nerve drops. The houses of ordeal were not metaphors, and this one is awake.
4	The Offering Refused. An artifact removed from the tunnel will not stay packed.	It is found back in its niche, or a team member keeps returning it with no memory of doing so. The descent wants its furniture left alone.
5	The Light That Lies. Head-lamps show a passage ahead; the photographs show solid wall.	One team member is already walking toward the passage that the camera says is not there. +Unraveling.
6	The Voice in the Survey. A recorder picks up speech in an old tongue from empty corridors.	Translated, it is a question, and it is waiting for an answer. Answering is the worst thing the party can do — and the most tempting.
7	The Map Folds. The route back now passes a chamber no one logged.	It belongs to the old descent, not the modern dig. The way out is longer than the way in, and watched.
8	The Door Opens Both Ways. The deepest seal is breached.	For the first time, something on the far side is moving <i>toward</i> the light. Unraveling at its peak; the lock is open.



CONNECTION TO LATHMAR: THE DOORS THAT BECAME ROADS

The southern realms of Lathmar already speak this language. The Ithrax are not pale things hiding in the dark like the Deep Elves; theirs is domination beneath the open sky — temple-pyramids and geometric monuments rising from jungle and swamp, raised by the labour of the Skarn. Theirs is hierarchy without visible kings, power without open violence, slavery dressed as order: the Skarn raise the stones, the Ithrax shape the minds, and the jungle itself seems to obey. The living mountain of Setting One is their world almost exactly — sacred architecture, public ritual, hidden foundations, and power reaching down into places ordinary people must never enter.

And the modern descent of Setting Two is the warning the Ithrax have already turned to profit. In Lathmar, the corrupted doors no longer lead where they should — a threshold may open into another structure, another region, far beyond the city. For most, this is catastrophe. For the Ithrax trapped in the old slave-mines beneath Lathmar, it is a gift. They watch the corrupted gates, learn which open and where and for how long, and turn the city's wound into a road: a door in the slave-pits may open into the southern jungle, or beside an Ithrax pyramid, or into a swamp where Skarn still raise stone under reptilian eyes. The slave-trade beneath Lathmar stops being a tunnel network and becomes a transregional system built on broken space — captives vanish through doors that should not exist, and the Ithrax need never conquer the city openly. They need only wait for the next opening.

The Shifting Doors (optional). *Ryn Lathmar's corrupted gates with the Unraveling clock from Setting Two turned into a tool: track which doors are open, where each leads, and how long it holds. The party gambles on a threshold that may strand them a region away; the Ithrax, who have studied the rhythm for years, read that clock far better than the party ever will. A wrong turn is a disappearance. A read turn is a supply line.*

That is the through-line of this whole series made flesh: ritual paths that became corridors, corridors that became traps, and at last doors that became *roads*. When a sacred mountain opens — above or below, then or now — something always comes through.

Campaign Note: *The Sacred Mountain is built to run as two campaigns that share one place. Setting One climbs; Setting Two descends; play them ages apart and let the players feel the same architecture turn from ladder to trap. The Standing and Unraveling rules pair with Lathmar's guild system — a guild may earn its way up a living Ithrax pyramid in one age, and break into its sealed root in another. For more about Lathmar and its own history and lore, visit [Lathmar: The Fallen Depths](#).*