

The Oracle at Hierapolis

The fun thing about the scientific mind is that it can be so usefully distracted. For example: does one have an oracular site with the unfortunate side effect that people and animals sometimes [suddenly die](#) in its proximity? Easy enough to arrange matters so that there's an convenient mundane explanation, like dangerously high levels of carbon dioxide emanating from a local cave. It's even better if you can put your oracular operation inside a cave that already *has* a toxic gas problem (assuming that you can compensate for that): you don't have to worry about people seeing through your fakery, because it's not actually fake in the first place.

And so we have the Oracle at Hierapolis. The area was a center for mystical healing, starting back in the Homeric era -- but it was the kind of mystical healing that later prompted the rise of Hippocrates and Asclepius in reaction. One of the things that they don't mention about the *Therapeutae of Asclepius* is that that particular group's history was later sanitized to remove all of the demon beheadings and vampire stakings and entire villages of howling cannibal medical cultists being burned to the ground. It's amazing what could get hidden, before the

creation of movable type. The right monk in the right scriptorium could more or less make entire wars go away, and quite often did.

So. Oracle at Hierapolis. Cult center. Dangerous, but usefully so: the on-site divinations worked, and they didn't have to be *quite* as bloodthirsty as the original cultists thought that they had to be. But the place is still pure hell on the local ecosystem. Some animals -- and humans -- simply can't handle the first shock of entering the local anti-vital field. Their nervous systems shut down, and that's all there is to it. This is where the existing carbon dioxide outgassing comes in really handy, because modern minds can understand that explanation without having to gibber about witchcraft. It's also a good way to keep well-meaning idiots out of the (literally) damned caves.

Except when the well-meaning idiots get a bunch of rebreathers and permission from the Turkish government to study the site. They went in three hours ago, and are on track to have missed their first check-in call by the time your team touches down at Denizli-Cardak Airport. Get there, assess the situation, try to save the research team, and figure out a good rationalization for why they can't go

back in until somebody can squash the original permissions.

And meddle with the site as little as possible. We don't actually know what's down there. Why? Because when you've been doing this for a while you learn caution. The thing to do with deep, dark holes is absolutely **not** to go and shove a big stick in it, 'just to see what will happen.' What will happen will usually be bad.

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