Pantheon Building
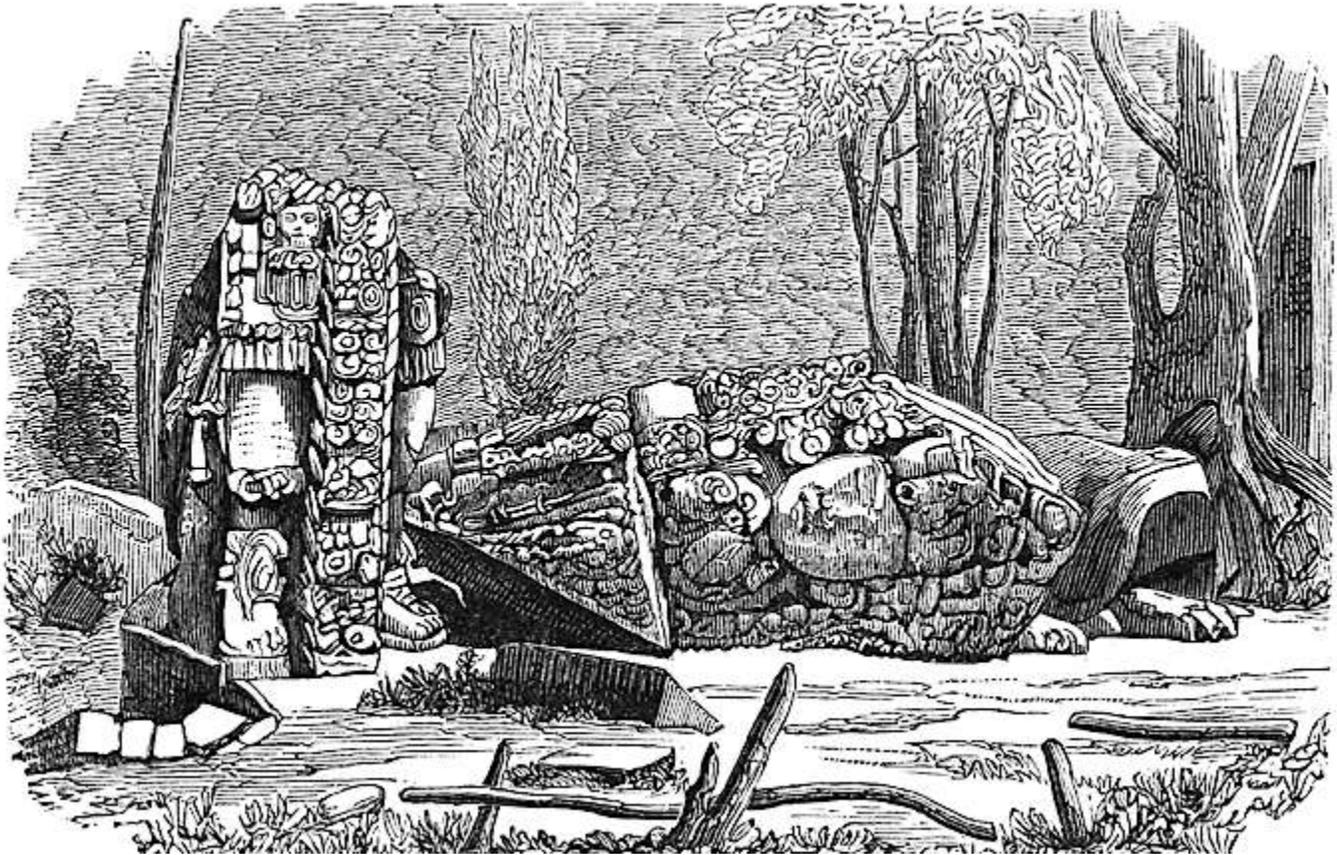
A Guide to Constructing a Fantasy Pantheon for Games or Fiction

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One of the most important parts of building your own fantasy setting is building a consistent, functional pantheon. In most fantasy settings, the gods are real entities that often directly interfere in the affairs of mortal. But even if your gods and goddesses are more myth than reality, crafting a pantheon that fits into your worldview will help provide a sense of place and purpose in your setting.

Unfortunately, often when people sit down to design pantheons, they tend to think of them in terms of how they relate to player classes and skills. World designers come into the process attempting to reverse engineer gods to fit some pre-conceived notions of what types of gods are needed to meet the needs of the players or characters. This leads to a stilted, often fragmented pantheon of unrelated gods and goddesses with little cohesiveness.

Pantheon Building is designed to provide a way of thinking about designing your pantheon. Use the information in this product to get a better understanding in order to develop a more organic feeling pantheon for your game world. This information can be used by both game designers looking to bring variety to their campaign settings, or by writers hoping to develop a believable pantheon for their fantasy fiction.
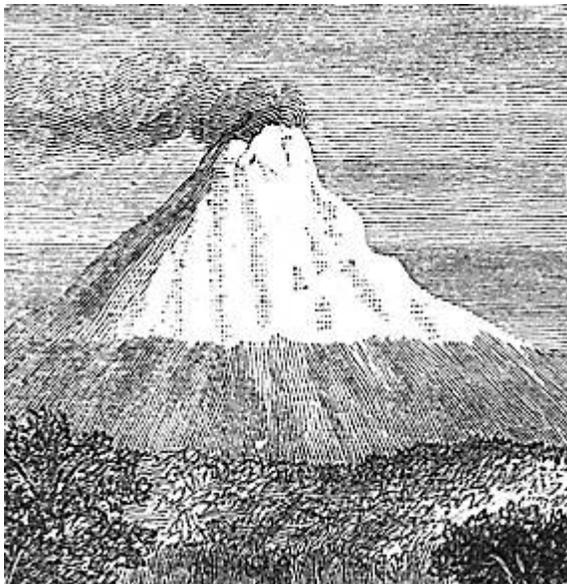
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In order to determine the nature of the gods that will populate your pantheon, you need to have a firm understanding of the needs of the people in your setting. The gods of a culture reflect what is most important to the culture, and what is most important to the culture depends on how far up the pyramid of needs the culture has evolved.

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published his book *A Theory of Human Motivation*, in which he stated the Hierarchy of Needs. Though considered a bit oversimplified by modern scholars, the concepts provide a good working basis for understanding cultural development. While all needs have importance to people, the dominant needs are those that must be met first in order for the person to focus energy on other needs. When these dominate needs are the primary focus of the culture, they will impact the types of gods that are worshiped.

Physiological needs:
These are the most basic needs of food, water, air, and other bodily needs. Raw survival is the dominant goal of someone at this level of the pyramid. The fight for food is the primary focus of the individual. What little culture exists is in the form of small hunting parties, which work together to bring down game and find other sustenance.

Security Needs:
Closely associated with the physiological needs are the security needs, and they often go hand in hand. Humans, at their most basic level, desire order and stability. Because order and stability ensures that the physiological needs are met. A person at this level on the pyramid is concerned with protection from the elements, safety from the wilds, and general security.

Roaming hunting groups begin to stake out territories that they patrol frequently to ensure security. Over time, the group has come to recognize the travel patterns of the herds they hunt, and they develop their territories in order to take advantage of this pattern.

Social Needs:

Social needs refer to a sense of belonging. Humans develop friendships and form family units. The hunting group has become a tribe, with each person clearly understanding his place in the social order. This order provides members with a sense of belonging, while also ensuring the needs of the physiological and security levels. Social standing in the tribe is determined by ones ability to maintain the security and physiological needs of the group. Here, the strong rule, whether that strength is in physical strength of magical power.

Esteem Needs:

Over time, the individuals in a society begin to develop their esteem needs. It is at this point that the notion of civilization begins to take form. Often, at this point the tribe has ceased to be nomadic, taking to developing agriculture and raising livestock instead of constantly hunting and gathering. The ability to secure the culture no longer rests on the most physically powerful, but the most resourceful. Individuals begin to develop a sense of self-esteem outside the most basic brute strength or might. People begin to desire respect, and develop respect for others. As civilization becomes more complex, people find new niches to fill that help society. And these niches provide venues to demonstrate accomplishment beyond merely providing food and water and shelter.

Self-actualization:

At the pinnacle of a culture, true self-actualization takes hold. Education, fine arts, ethics, creativity, and philosophy become important concepts to the people. Having developed an intricate system by which to ensure the more basic needs, the members of the culture now have the leisure to pursue individual goals and desires.

Evolution of a God

The Physiological God

The gods of a people still at the most basic level of the pyramid reflect the most primitive needs. The most ancient people did not pray to human-looking metaphysical beings, but very real creatures around them. When the hunting party downs a deer, they pray to the spirit of the deer, offering thanks that it sacrificed itself so that the hunters can survive. Over time, the deer itself becomes revered for its life-giving flesh.

The Security God

Over time, the people begin to develop a more uniform group. They have begun to notice how the deer move through the woods, and more importantly, how the stags will move to protect their mates or fight over mates. The people begin to gain a new respect for the animal, recognizing the strength of the dear to fight. The deer no longer represents just food, but the hunter aspect itself. The cult of the spirit begins

to stop thinking of the deer as a spirit itself, but as a gift from a hunter-god to protect the people. The people begin to think of the stag as a sacred animal to the hunter god, and begin to revere the god.

The Social God

At this point, the social structure of the tribe becomes important. The Potnia Theron, The Mistress of Animals or the Great Huntress, blesses the tribe (and particularly, the Chieftain). The Chieftain in such cultures is often viewed as a mortal consort of the goddess, blessed by her to oversee the tribe. In this manner, the worship of the deity evolves to not only encompass the act of hunting, but also to promote the social order by offering divine backing to the ruler. When the tribe prepares for war, the goddess is invoked to bless the tribe in battle. In this aspect, she also becomes a war deity.

The Esteem God

At this point, the Great Huntress has become Artemis, goddess of the hunt. But she is no longer revered as a benevolent goddess that brings game to the tribe. Now, she comes to represent the competitive spirit of the hunt. Her myths often involve contests between mortals vying to demonstrate their superior skills. She becomes more dangerous, punishing those that fail…as well as those that succeed and become too boastful over it. In many ways, she becomes an embodiment of the dangers of becoming overly concerned with personal esteem, possibly as a way for the established rulers to protect their own interests.

The Self-Actualization God

Artemis becomes a patron to young women that wish to be free of the confines of what has become a patriarchal culture. Her worshippers view her as the embodiment of self-actualization. Her virginity becomes important because it is a personal choice, at a point in the culture when young women are often seen as commodities used as trade goods in arranged marriages that deny them their own self-actualization. Her cult spreads as the Cult of Diana throughout Europe even as Christianity takes hold, due to a rebellion against what is viewed as a denial of self-actualization.

Government Structures

Another important consideration when developing a pantheon is the type of government structure the people employ. The nature of the government does have an impact on how people perceive themselves, and by extension their place in the greater universe and by further extension their relationship with the divine.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it does touch briefly on the major forms of government that one would expect to find in a fantasy setting. While the explanations may be oversimplified, they are meant to merely give a framework, not a full history lesson.

Democracy

A government structure in which all citizens have an opportunity to impact the government. Generally, democracies only develop when a culture has reached the level of self-actualization. While a democratic society may have a dominant religion, it can support a wide variety of faiths, many which may even seem to oppose or contradict each other.

Matriarchy

A government structure in which the mother figure has the power. Unlike a monarchy in which the ruler happens to be female, a matriarchy holds that women are the ones who have the right to hold power. Most anthropologists agree that the existence of a true matriarchy has never been proven. If it did ever exist in human culture, it would have been at the physiological and security levels, at a point when the process of giving birth was still considered a mystical act and women therefore were viewed as possessing some power over life. In a matriarchy, religions will focus on the feminine aspects.

Matrifocal

A government structure in which the mother figure is given priority, but not necessarily power, in the culture. Many tribal cultures are both patriarchal and matrifocal, whereas the males are considered the proper rulers of the tribe, but the women are to be treated in a certain manner out of respect for their role as mothers and nurturers of the next generation. In such cultures, feminine gods that served as mothers and nurturers would be revered, though still subservient to the male gods of strength and war.

Monarchy

A government structure in which one person has absolute authority. Generally, rule is handed down from father to son. Strict hierarchies develop, with a person's "place" in the hierarchy determining his personal worth.

In a monarchy, you will generally find a "state sanctioned" religion, with only those faiths accepted by the monarch being granted the right to exist. Monarchies generally develop as a culture moves out of the Social level and into the esteem level. Most of the gods will focus on respect for and development of authority, acceptance of one's place, and the development of crafts. The pantheons of a monarchy are often rather limited, with "official" deities being afforded large temples, while "unofficial" deities become vilified or treated as evil demons.

Patriarchy

A government structure in which the father figure or males have the power. Patriarchies are common in tribal cultures, where raw strength is valued above all else. Many monarchies are also patriarchies.

Republic

A government structure in which at least a portion of the population has a say in matter of government. Republics generally do not develop until a culture has neared the level of self-actualization, in which the desires of individuals begin to become more important. Historically, the primary reason for the rise of a republic was to allow more freedom of religion. By negating the power of a monarch, a republic could allow individuals more freedom to worship as they wished. Pantheons are portrayed as more cooperative, or at least with having the semblance of cooperation.

**The Role of the Environment**

Along the coast, where people depend on the ocean to survive, storms would be a disastrous event. Here, a Gods of Storms would be feared, and sacrifices would be made to appease the evil deity to prevent storms. In the desert, where sources of water are limited and the people

depend on the flooding of the nearby river to fertilize the soil for farming, the God of Storms would be respected, and offerings would be make to welcome the benevolent deity that brings the rain that floods the river.

The environment of the setting has a huge impact on how people perceive their gods, as well as the type of gods that would be found. A people that live in a frozen tundra will revere fire deities as benevolent beings that bring life-saving fire to protect against the cold. Whereas a people the live in a temperate forest may consider a fire deity evil, because fire can so quickly level the woods. How people relate to their environment will impact the types of gods found in it. A people that live in the mountains will have little use for a god of the oceans, even if they do occasionally fish in the nearby river. A culture that is dependent on the sea might not have much use for a god of mining, even if they do possess a few blacksmiths in their land.

Bringing it all together
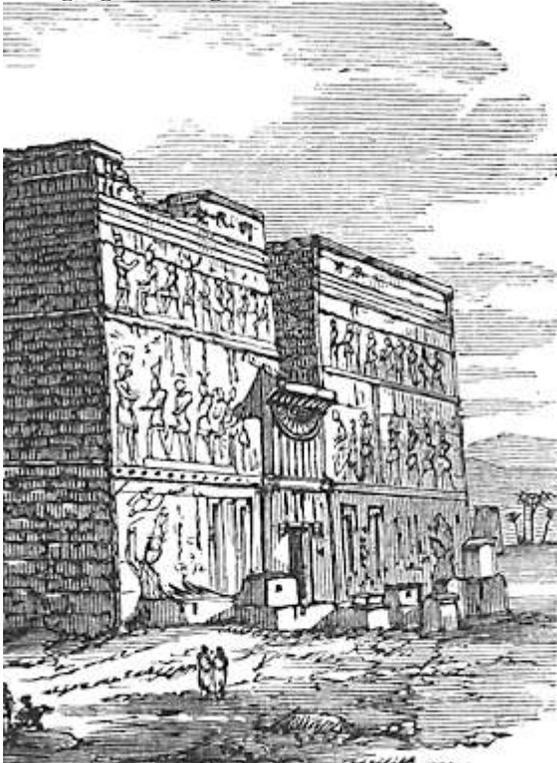
The biggest mistake many world designers make is to try and create one giant "catch-all" pantheon in which all of the gods are part of one massive divine family. But the fact is that, if one is to seriously develop a functional and believable set of gods, it is better to design multiple smaller pantheons instead. The barbarian tribes of the plains are not going to recognize the gods of a cosmopolitan republic. At best, they will view them as previously unknown aspects of their own gods. At worst, they will consider them abominations. More often, they will be indifferent. To think that the barbarian god of war is related to the republic's goddess of merchants may be a common easy out in some settings, but it is not really credible.

Of course, in fantasy settings where the gods are real entities, these gods may in fact know each other. But they would have separate pantheons and rarely interact with each other unless the followers of one pantheon were harassing, attacking, or trying to convert the followers of another.

Questions to Ask:

What is the environment of the setting?

Where is the culture on the Hierarchy of Needs?

What type of government is prevalent?

How do the different races interact?
If your world has multiple different races (and most fantasy settings do), it is important to understand how these races interact. In settings where races are isolated from each other, the races will rarely share gods. In settings where the races have cooperative relationships, they may share gods.

How Many Gods?
Generally, the lower a culture is on the Hierarchy of Needs, the fewer gods they will have. Gods will be very generalized. The higher up the pyramid, the more gods the culture will have. These gods may fill very specific niches and be very specialized. A culture high on the pyramid may have a specific god of bards. A culture low on the pyramid would have no need for such a deity. While the culture might have people who fill the role of a bard, generally the culture will not have a god dedicated specifically to them.

Notes: