

Clans & Cave Lions

A Pleistocene
Roleplaying
Game Setting



PAST  ADVENTURES

This work includes material taken from the System Reference Document 5.1 ("SRD 5.1") by Wizards of the Coast LLC and available at <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document>.

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What Is This?

Clans & Cave Lions is a roleplaying game designed to be played with polyhedral dice, pen, and paper, either in person or through the uses of a virtual tabletop. The game is played with a referee, who organizes the game and has full god-like knowledge of an imagined world, and one or more players, who take on the identity of player-characters (PCs) and collaboratively wind out a story using die-rolling as a mechanism to determine events. *Clans & Cave Lions* is written explicitly for use with the 5th edition System Reference Document (SRD 5.1) by *Wizards of the Coast*—the system that serves as the basis for the most popular fantasy roleplaying game. Full use of this game book requires the published SRD rules. However, the substantial background, narrative-generating tools, and introductory adventure can be used with any roleplaying system that supports primitive technology and fantastic magic.

The setting for *Clans & Cave Lions* is a fantasy version of Pleistocene Europe about 40,000 years ago. This is an era of paleolithic stone age cultures, as both Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon peoples struggle against nature, the spirit world, and each other to survive. Existence itself is perilous, with stone and bone spears and axes the primary weapon technologies. Threats come from packs of predators, massive megafauna, and capricious or malevolent spirits. A lone human is unlikely to survive long. The social bonds and cooperative power of a clan are critical to survival—banishment is likely a death sentence. The PCs in a *Clans & Cave Lions* campaign are assumed to be members of a small clan of Neanderthals, Cro-Magnons, or, possibly, Denisovans.

Clans & Cave Lions uses abbreviations and terminology that should be familiar to experienced tabletop roleplayers. The omniscient game referee is referred to as a game master (GM), while the fantastic prehistoric characters embodied by the players are referred to as player-characters (PCs). Other characters, controlled by the GM, who play additional roles in the story are referred to as non-player-characters (NPCs). Resolution of events, combat, and various challenges is accomplished by rolling polyhedral dice. The game is organized around the typical set of four-sided, six-sided, eight-sided, ten-sided, twelve-sided, and twenty-sided dice. References to these dice rolls are abbreviated as number of dice, followed by “d”, followed by the size of the die: 2d8 means roll two eight-sided dice and sum the result. In some cases, two ten-sided dice are rolled to generate a “percentile” roll from 1 to 100, using one die to indicate ten’s place and the second to indicate the units place (d100). Occasionally, a simple arithmetic operation will be indicated: 1d6+2 means roll one six-sided die and add two to the result, while 1d10x2 means roll one ten-sided die and double the result.

As described in the SRD, most skill checks involve rolling against a difficulty class (DC) value. In order to succeed, the player (on behalf of their PC) or GM (on behalf of the rest of the universe) must roll one twenty-sided die, adding the relevant ability modifier (e.g., Strength), as well as a proficiency bonus (+2 at first level), and subtracting any relevant penalties. If the resulting modified roll equals or exceeds the DC, the check is a success. Most DCs are 10 or 15. In some cases, circumstances might confer “Advantage” or “Disadvantage” on the skill check. When Advantage is indicated, roll TWO twenty-sided dice and use the higher result. When Disadvantage is indicated, roll TWO twenty-sided dice and use the lower result.

Past Adventures

Past Adventures produces settings for tabletop roleplaying games focused on historical fiction adventure stories. Each setting is defined by a single year or period and a place, detailing specific scenarios of dramatic adventure with the backdrop of pivotal changes in world events. As such, Past Adventures brings the tradition of fantasy to a historically-anchored setting—a fictional universe that amounts to a revisionist historical sandbox for developing adventure narratives that reflect the real world as it was.

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On the Steppe

Todo Golden Star set a spirited pace on his long shanks as he hustled across the expansive mammoth steppe well ahead of the girl. Although she had only lived for fourteen winters, Magoma was no stranger to the rapid pace of the men once they got out onto the open grasslands. But you would think that after his countless winters the old man's pace might have slackened a bit. She was practically jogging on her shorter legs, sweating despite the chilly late afternoon breeze, just trying to keep up. She would have much preferred one of the younger men as her guide, but the Raven Clan couldn't spare a young hunter. Golden Star had been given the task by Chief Wild Cloud and the old man clearly resented the loss of social status this represented. Someone had to escort young Magoma to the Crane Clan where she would be mated to Koto-Sono, a young hunter five winters her senior who she had met only once.

She knew she was part of a long tradition. The bonds between the Raven and Crane Clans were

strong. For many generations they had allied for mammoth hunts each year. Even if they only took one, it would feed both clans for two moons. And they needed to keep the alliance, so that young girls could find suitable mates. Furthermore, they needed to ally to confront the threat of the southfolk, the strange black-haired warriors with flat faces who sometimes raided their herds and fought with cowardly sticks that let them throw spears from a great distance instead of fighting face-to-face. Or so all the warriors in the Raven Clan told her. Bright Owl, their shaman, held that the southfolk were born from the waters of a great southern sea, the offspring of malevolent spirits that want to test the fortitude of the people. Whatever their origin, the southfolk often figured in Magoma's nightmares. She was certain they would do unwholesome things to her.

Todo halted suddenly, holding up a wrinkled palm in warning.

Magoma stopped and instinctively crouched behind a knee-high crowberry bush.

Todo slowly pulled his spear from its sheath on his back and tensed in readiness. Although she was no hunter yet, Magoma also loosed her spear from her back—no one went out onto the steppe unarmed.

The old hunter turned slightly towards the girl and signaled with his hands: a red deer fawn, injured and limping, with the mother nearby. This was an opportunity no hunter could pass by, even one past his prime. It was just upwind of them to the left, lapping cold water from a tiny streamlet behind a small stand of willows.

Magoma tensed and crouched lower, determined not to give them away, while Todo surveyed the local landscape for cover possibilities and slowly began to cover the distance between him and his quarry.

One step at a time, he moved closer and closer, keeping the willows between himself and the deer. Now, Magoma could only see the back of the old man's graying auburn hair over the rise ahead of her as he stalked his prey.

Expertly harnessing decades of experience and motor-memory, Todo slanted to the left, keeping in a

low crouch as he moved to get the fawn into view from behind the willows. The little creature bleated and staggered on its one broken leg. It would not be able to move quickly.

Todo took his shot, without hesitation, thrusting his spear into the air with a very gentle arc. It whistled toward the deer and in sudden panic, mother and fawn both leapt from the stream. The fawn was not quick on its broken leg, and Todo's slight misaim caught the young ungulate in a rear leg as it attempted to get away.

The fawn bleated in terror as its legs collapsed under it and Todo converged with all his sprinting speed to reach the creature before it could gain its feet again. The deer was just getting back underway when Todo reached it with his rock knife and the force of his significant weight. Down went the terrified animal, and with quick knife strikes to the neck, the hunter dispatched his kill, while the mother sprinted away, undoubtedly in distress.

With the sounds of the kill, Magoma sprinted from her location, dodging sedge and boulders, racing over the rise and down to the streambed. As she approached, she could see the old man leaning over the dead fawn, arms stretched skyward and head bowed down as he thanked the spirit of the fawn for its generous sacrifice so that they might prosper.

But then! In a flash, a flurry of commotion exploded to her right from the stand of willows. Three hyenas she hadn't known were there charged out to ambush the hunter in order to hijack the kill.

Magoma instinctively halted, dropping low and bringing her spear to bear. She screamed while Todo grabbed up his spear and resolutely stood to challenge the attackers. He lunged forward with his spear, piercing the lead hyena in its shoulder. But the weight of the great predator's charge was too much for the old man, and he staggered backward from the blow, tripping over the carcass of the fawn and falling onto his rear. The other two hyenas were onto him in a second, one grabbing his spear arm in savage, rending jaws while the other made for his throat.

Adrenaline surged through the girl as she unwisely closed and flung her spear with all her might at the nearest hyena. Amazingly, the spear struck home into the flank of the beast. It wheeled and howled bloody murder.

"Run! Run foolish girl!" yelled Todo, as the other two hyenas continued to maul him without mercy.

And, indeed, despite the spear projecting from its side, the third hyena charged Magoma in a furious, slobbering rage.

Now unarmed, Magoma took flight. She bounded across sedge and fescue and rock, concentrating on every stride in order to keep her feet and sprint like she had never before. At first, it seemed that the hyena was gaining on her and panic began to double as she anticipated a horrific demise. But soon the wound and extra weight of the projecting spear took its toll and the pursuer's pace slackened before the hyena finally gave up, panting and grievously injured.

After another fifty yards, Magoma slackened her pace too, as the stitch in her side became unbearable and the demand for air overwhelming. She jogged for another hundred yards or so, terrified and desperate, before finally stopping and leaning over, hands on knees, to pant greedily. Without warning, she vomited. The last part of the globe of the sun sunk below horizon to the west. Magoma was alone on the steppe. Unarmed. At night.

At dawn, Magoma stirred from under her wolfskin shawl and blanket of willow branches. She ached from an uncomfortable, cold sleep wedged between two larger boulders alongside the streamlet. But at least her appeal to the earth spirits had protected her rest—no beasts or dangerous men had come calling overnight. Awkwardly, she emerged from her shelter into the bright yellow light and chilly air. She began chewing on a piece of jerky as she slowly began her hike. She was only half certain of the direction of the Crane Clan's camp atop a wooded bluff. But now she would have to find it alone. She clutched the raven claw amulet necklace around her neck. It was a memory of her old home and the source of strength she needed to find her new home.



The Pleistocene World

Clans & Cave Lions is nominally set in a mythical Pleistocene Europe about 40,000 years ago. This is a period of colder temperatures and extensive glaciation. The sea level lies well below its location today. Huge areas that are now underwater were land then, including an icy steppe connecting the British Isles of today to mainland Europe. Most of northern Europe is entirely glaciated, as are much of the highlands of the Alps and Pyrenees. This is a world of expansive grasslands and massive megafauna, tenacious predators, and small bands of people—Cro-Magnon modern humans, Neanderthals, and tiny scattered bands of Denisovans to the east in Asia. The people of Pleistocene Europe are clever and resourceful hunters, greatly feared by the animal life of the period. Life is precarious. The environment is unforgiving, and competition among different people sometimes lead to violence. The growth of these populations is very slow, often hovering at basic replacement rates and two human peoples—the Neanderthals and Denisovans are in decline. And yet, the people of the Pleistocene world seem much like modern humans. They have language, complex religious beliefs, elaborate cultural norms, a tremen-

dous attunement to their environment, refined craftsmanship, dreams, and personal struggles. Small, closely-related bands, called clans, are the primary and immediate social group. Clans sometimes meet with and form various kinds of alliances with other clans, at times organizing themselves into larger tribes. While survival is a constant occupation, the various people of the Pleistocene are motivated by sex, family, politics, and religion, just like the humans of later eras.

Clans & Cave Lions, like other *Past Adventures* publications, tries to honor the current scholarly understanding of the lives of the people of the time. However, this is prehistory—there is no written record to discover and interpret. The evidence is paleontological, archaeological, and genetic—not much to go on, often professionally-contested, and necessarily conjectural, even if well-reasoned. As such, *Clans & Cave Lions* enjoys some substantial fictional license, making choices among competing ideas of experts and filling in details based on knowledge obtained since colonial contact with technologically-similar people. From a scholarly perspective, these are highly-suspect inferences. For example, most original people of the Americas practiced substantial agriculture at the time of European contact—Cro-

Magnons, Neanderthals, and Denisovans did not. Or at least we don't think so. Other practices of low technology Americans and Africans may or may not inform on Pleistocene reality. *Clans & Cave Lions* provides a somewhat fictionalized, fantasy-like view of Pleistocene life, full of social, natural, and supernatural challenges.

Timeline

The world of 40,000 BP is situated in the later portion of the geological Quaternary period (from 2.6M BP to the present), and the later portion of the Pleistocene epoch (2.58M BP to 12K BP), roughly half-way through the Upper or Late Pleistocene age (129K BP to 12K BP). This age featured the "Last Glacial Period", which peaked with a glacial maximum about 25K BP. In the Alps, this period is referred to as the Würm glaciation. Earth is well into this classic, great "Ice Age"—with temperatures continuing to drop. From an archaeological perspective, this is the very beginning of the "Upper Paleolithic" period, when new human innovations are beginning to move people out of the Old Stone Age and eventually into the Mesolithic period and the transition to agriculture.

What year is it?

Clans & Cave Lions uses the "BP" designation to identify years as "before present." Obviously, this is an imprecise scale, since "present" is a moving target. This hardly matters, since our geological, paleontological, and genetic understanding are approximations at the level of thousands to hundreds of thousands of years. The "BP" designation is preferred since it references no particular religious reference point, and is a bit more parsimonious than "BCE" (before the common era).

Climate

Worldwide temperatures are about 10°F colder, on average, than modern day temperatures. Therefore, in southern France, the average January high is only about 44°F and the average July high about 75°F. Although the French Mediterranean coast rarely experiences freezing temperatures now, it does so most winter nights during the Late Pleistocene. All of Switzerland, most of Austria, and the Italian Alps

are solid, permanent glacier. A massive northern glacier, the Weichselian glaciation, keeps most of the British Isles and all of Scandinavia under permanent, thick ice.

So much water is frozen into massive glaciers worldwide, that sea level is about 250 feet lower than modern day. Adventurous Neanderthals and migrating mammoths can walk from France to southern England. The Adriatic Sea is considerably smaller than today. The effect of colder air, which holds less moisture, and the fact that so much water is locked up in the glaciers, results in much drier air at mid-latitudes. Even if colder, most days are relatively sunny, and precipitation is somewhat infrequent. The Ice Age isn't dark. Daylength varies by latitude, just as it does now.

Biomes and Landscape

As a result of the drier conditions, much of Europe is an extensive grassland—referred to as the "Mammoth Steppe". These great dry open lands of Europe sport grasses, sedge, herbs, and ferns, as well as crowberry evergreen and willow shrubs. The biomass is massive—providing the essential space, nutrients, and calories for huge herds of gigantic mammals. Much of the land is rolling, not flat like the great plains of the Americas.

In spring and summer, the edges of the great alpine and northern continental glaciers melt, feeding countless streams that wind together down on the lowlands to create swollen rivers that meander across the Mammoth Steppe. Despite the lack of regular rainfall, the glacial runoff helps maintain wetlands and small lakes. As the highland glaciers refreeze in early autumn, the waterways of the steppe retreat, before they finally ice over themselves.

Woodlands are small, often limited to river valleys and wetter regions fed by melting glaciers. The most common trees are birch, alder, and hazel. Oak, pine, beech, willow, and juniper round out the Pleistocene forests. Small stands of trees break up the monotony of the grasslands and tenacious dwarf trees cling to rocky hillsides in the highlands.



Animal Life

Like the extensive African savanna of today, the sprawling grasslands of Pleistocene Europe support great herds of gigantic herbivorous beasts. Among these huge herbivores are the cattle-like auroch and bison, horses, woolly rhinoceros, and of course, the largest of all, the canonical mammoth. In the rivers and wetlands of the Mediterranean coast, there are hippopotamus. The megafauna share the plains with ibex, deer, Irish elk, wild ass, and reindeer. The woodlands and wetlands house beaver, hare, porcupine, and dozens of smaller mammal species such as squirrels, hare, bats, and mice. Even in the woodlands, the creatures of the Pleistocene are somewhat larger than the equivalent species of today.

Carnivores prey on this abundant game, and compete with humans for resources. The largest predators include the brown bear, cave bear, cave lion, scimitar cat, and hyena. Smaller predators, including cave leopard, dire wolf, lynx, otter, weasel, wolf, and wolverine, range between woodlands and steppe.

Bird life is also abundant, with familiar grassland species predominating. Various grouse, ptarmigan, partridge, and peafowl congregate in great flocks on

the open steppe. Wetlands provide ecosystems for grebe, swan, crane, egret, storks, and gulls. Eagles and falcons hunt wherever they please. Woodlands support sparrows, crows, magpie, and barn and wood owls.

Other animals round out the European Pleistocene bestiary. There are salamanders, newts, toads, frogs, snakes and turtles. The streams team with eel, salmon, trout, sturgeon, and lamprey. Foragers may also find mussels, snails, and crayfish.

Neanderthals

The primary humans of Europe, the cold-adapted fair Neanderthals, are being challenged by darker, innovative Cro-Magnon people who have migrated from the Middle East. The Neanderthals have been the dominant people of Europe, the Middle East, and western Asia for over 100,000 years—a remarkably successful run encompassing both cold ice ages and warmer spells. In comparison to modern humans, Neanderthals are somewhat shorter, with broad shoulders and barrel chests, as well as being considerably more muscular. Their heads and faces have a distinctive appearance—a large lower jaw lacking a

protruding chin, a wide mouth and nose, a prominent brow ridge above the eyes, and a sloped, receding forehead. The overall skull size is larger. They are fairly hairy, sporting copious red, brown, and perhaps even blond hair. They likely have brown, blue, or green eyes. Although they may tend towards lighter skin, constant exposure to the sun renders them bronzed to varying degrees. Their overall physiology is adapted to cold, allowing them to prosper during the long European ice ages.

Despite their long tenure and success on the Eurasian landmass, Neanderthal populations have not grown appreciably. Their history probably has periods of population growth followed by periods of decline. They tend to live in small groups, and without agriculture to support larger populations are often close to replacement growth rates—essentially stasis. Most of their huge demand for calories comes from hunting large game, a source that can be unpredictable. They typically live no more than 40 years, and are prone to much earlier deaths from hunting accidents and violent confrontations with other humans. Various fac-



tors, including a relatively small gene pool, high degrees of inbreeding, low overall fertility, and perhaps competition with newly-arrived Cro-Magnons, are precipitating a major decline in the Neanderthal way of life and existence. Within a few thousand years, they will be gone.

Reality Check

Evidence about the biology and culture of Neanderthals is extremely limited, based primarily on a few hundred fossilized bones, genetic data from a few specimens, worked stone tools, and a few sites with animal remains. This provides only a limited amount of high-confidence genetic and physical data. Much of our view of Neanderthals, particularly their cognition and behavior, is based on inferences, many of which are certainly incorrect. The archaeological evidence points to fairly well-developed craftsmanship that nonetheless lacks the refinement and ingenuity of the Cro-Magnon humans that came later. Anatomical and physiological analyses give a good sense of size and some key physical features, like slightly improved cold tolerance. Genetic data demonstrate that Neanderthals were able to breed with Cro-Magnons and Denisovans. The small amount of genetic data available provides some evidence for lighter complexion and red to brown hair. This seems logical, given the evolution of very pale skin and blond hair for modern humans at high latitudes over a much shorter timeline. The lack of genetic diversity in the samples evaluated so far argues for a fairly inbred, low-population existence. Neanderthals had the same version of a key language gene as modern humans, indicating the potential for a sophisticated language. They also had a very well-developed immune system, suggesting they were no more prone to disease than those who came later.