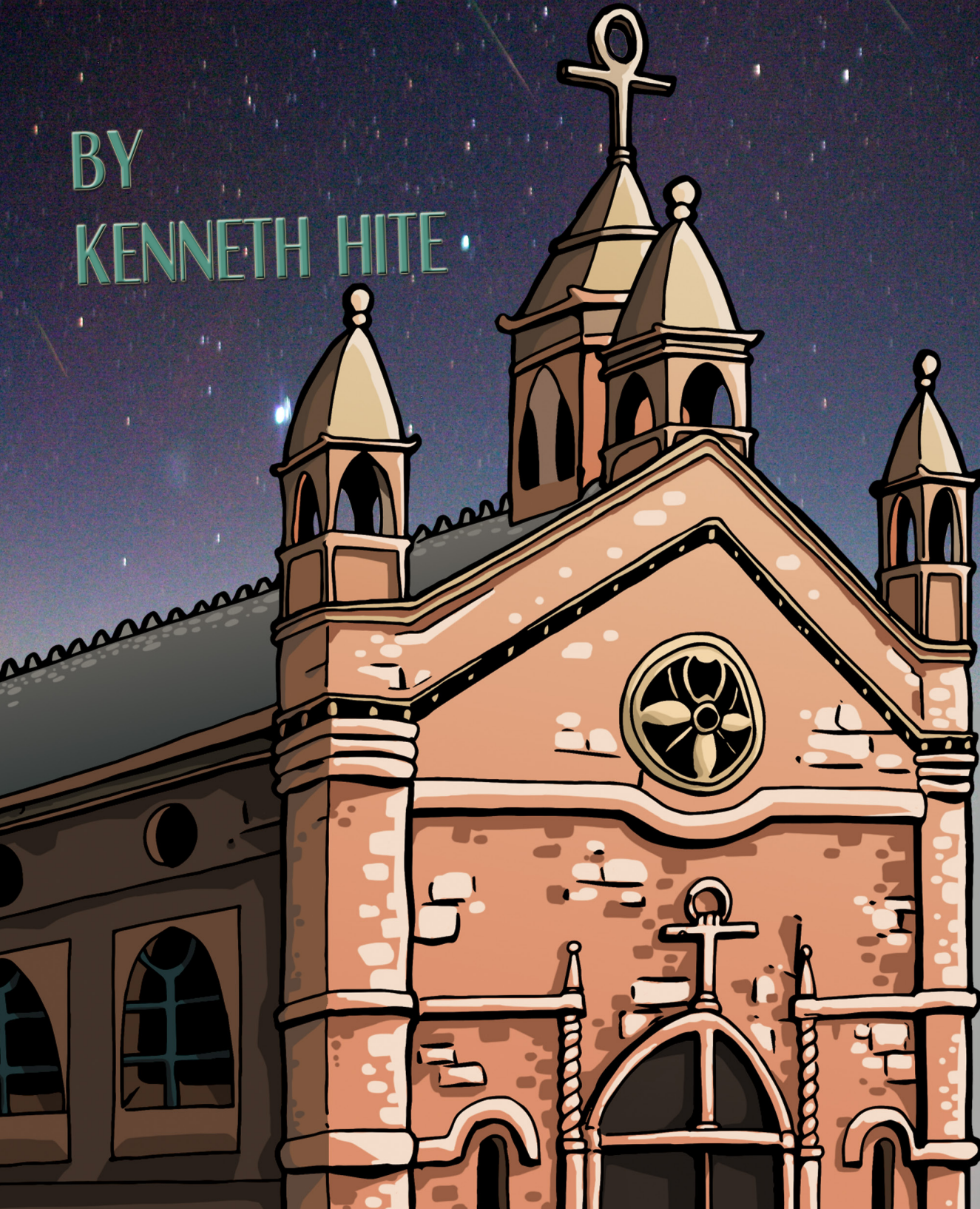


# UNSPEAKABLE CULTS: THE STARRY WISDOM

BY  
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Pelgrane Press





## UNSPEAKABLE CULTS: THE STARRY WISDOM

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# KEN WRITES ABOUT STUFF

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# Unspeakable Cults: The Starry Wisdom

## INTRODUCTION

Cults in Lovecraft's universe form at the interface between titanic alien consciousness and human-primate psychology. People tainted by the Mythos reinterpret their experiences in their own familiar languages of power, death, evil, and devotion. Unstable folk fall into patterns of madness and belief, drawn by their leader's vision or by their own dreams or both. The Mythos damages a human mind and leaves behind mania; it damages a human society and leaves behind a cult.

In game terms, cultists provide both human-scale opponents and investigable symptoms of the horror present under the surface or behind the scenes of history. A cult, meanwhile, provides not just a framework for belief but a framework for story and investigation: the cult's action attracts the Investigators' reaction, or the Investigators' fight against the Mythos brings blowback and revenge.

In our final issue of the year, we give the Hideous Creatures treatment not to one beast but to a whole cult — the “disliked and unorthodox Starry Wisdom sect.” Herein, vile rites and terrifying symbolism unfold to shadow your *Trail of Cthulhu* game, along with investigative leads, possible echoes, and sinister scenario seeds. As always, the goal is to inspire creativity, not to restrict play: contradictions and alternate possibilities abound. In your campaign, these variant truths might be misunderstandings, legends, heresies, or deliberate lies spread by the cultists: only the initiates may know the true wisdom of the stars!

## STARRY WISDOM

“... CERTAIN FACTS SUCH AS THE UNDOUBTED GENUINENESS OF THE

OLD CHURCH RECORD, THE VERIFIED EXISTENCE OF THE DISLIKED AND UNORTHODOX STARRY WISDOM SECT PRIOR TO 1877.”

-- “THE HAUNTER OF THE DARK”

In 1844, Professor Enoch Bowen uncovered the Shining Trapezohedron, a mystical container for the aspect of Nyarlathotep known as the Haunter of the Dark, in the Egyptian tomb of the Pharaoh Nephren-Ka. The visions he received from the object led him to found the Starry Wisdom Church in his home town of Providence, Rhode Island. Its rites were described as Egyptian occultism, and its icons resembled the statues of Easter Island more than Egyptian gods. By 1863, the Starry Wisdom had over 200 members; when Bowen died in 1866, Dr. Raymond Flagg became the minister.

In 1877, following a series of publicized missing-child cases and at least one Irish riot, the town council of Providence moved against the Starry Wisdom Church. Its membership scattered, leaving its library of eldritch tomes and the Trapezohedron sealed in their old church on Federal Hill in Providence. Dr. Bowen's granddaughter Asenath remained in Providence, and she may have nurtured a continued secret remnant. In 1935, a deranged artist named Robert Blake discovers the remains of the church and dies in a lightning storm. According to later reports, a Dr. Ambrose Dexter recovers the library and the Trapezohedron that year and disappears.

## Starry Wisdom Cultist

**Abilities:** Athletics 3, Health 3, Scuffling 2, Weapons 1 (if armed)

**Magic:** Probably none, although they

may be able to contribute 1 or 2 points each of Health or Stability to a spell or ritual cast by their clergy.

**Hit Threshold:** 3

**Alertness Modifier:** -1 (religious ecstasy) or +1 (nervous about being caught)

**Stealth Modifier:** +0 (untrained but sometimes sneaks up on children)

**Weapon:** -2 (fist or kick), -1 (club or knife)

## Starry Wisdom Clergy

**Abilities:** Athletics 2, Health 6 (pure cussedness), Scuffling 4 (deranged), Weapons 4 (likewise, if armed)

**Magic:** 9-12; Contact Haunter of the Dark [Nyarlathotep], Summon/Bind Hunting Horror, others as desired.

**Hit Threshold:** 3 (5 in the light of the Trapezohedron or equivalent portal)

**Alertness Modifier:** +1 (weirdly heightened senses)

**Stealth Modifier:** +0

**Weapon:** -1 (fist or kick, unholy strength), +0 (club or knife)

## Possible Cultist Abilities

Either their own magical and Egyptological researches, or the black gifts of Nyarlathotep, may convey additional power on cultists of the Starry Wisdom. It's more likely that a single deacon or a few vestrymen have a power than it is for the entire cult, although the cult's minister might know a spell that can convey it to any or all congregants.

The numbers after each ability indicate roughly how many Magic points/Stability points using that ability should cost. Treat these numbers as abstractions for the most part: a low-level cultist might have one ability cast on him; the cult's Chosen One might be able to use all of them at will.

**Aklo:** Lovecraft writes that the sacred book of the Starry Wisdom is written in



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the sorcerous Aklo language. Cultists can communicate in Aklo with virtually no chance of being understood by non-initiates. (0)

**Astromancy:** The cult possesses the “starry wisdom,” after all – traditionally the knowledge of the future. By studying the stars, an elder can predict a seemingly surprise raid by the Investigators – or know where a target will be at sundown. (1)

**Greater Aklo:** Aklo words are heavier than normal words; they can remake the hearer’s or reader’s perceptions and even her mind. Treat Greater Aklo as the equivalent of Hypnosis 6; spending 1 Magic point on the Aklo Hypnosis test adds +2 to the roll. Aklo Hypnosis can work even on an unwilling subject; at +4 Difficulty it can even work on a waking target not in a trance. Against NPCs, a cultist might know one or two Aklo commands (“Sleep” or “Paralyzing Fear”) for 2 Magic each. (minimum spend 1)

**Haunter Communion:** Those who gaze into the Trapezohedron commune with the Haunter of the Dark. They can also share minds with – and the more powerful ones simply step into the weaker mind of – anyone else who has looked into that dark crystal. Against PCs, sharing minds is a contest of Magic vs. Stability; the cultist takes over either on the PC’s failure or when the target reaches Stability -5. If the target reaches Stability -12, the cultist can occupy her victim’s mind at will at any time. (1 for brief communion or messages, 2 for sharing or occupying a body)

**Sight That Is Not Sight:** The cultist communes with the Haunter, realigning his optic nerve with the ultraterrestrial entity’s perceptions. Light and darkness reverse themselves: the cultist can see perfectly in pitch blackness, but cannot navigate in bright sunlight. Using the Sight, her eyes seem to film over with black oil. In some scenarios, or for some cultists, this ability may be permanent. (2; permanent Sight costs 0)

**Skrying:** By gazing into a reflective or shining mineral surface – amber, jade,

obsidian, opal, quartz or other crystals – the cultist can see anywhere or anyone that the Haunter (or perhaps even Nyarlathotep) can see. Which is pretty much anywhere or anyone not protected by the Sign of Eibon. (2)

Structure and Symbols

“THE DESIGNS WERE LARGELY CONVENTIONAL, AND HIS KNOWLEDGE OF OBSCURE SYMBOLISM TOLD HIM MUCH CONCERNING SOME OF THE ANCIENT PATTERNS.”

– “THE HAUNTER OF THE DARK”

Although your treatment of the Starry Wisdom can vary depending on your story and your horror agenda, a few basic elements likely remain the same – or else the cult becomes another entity entirely. Digging into those elements can provide grist for our changes, and even impel them in unexpected directions.

Cult Structure

The cult operated explicitly as a “Church” in Providence, with Enoch Bowen as its charismatic leader and likely “voice” or incarnation of the Haunter. Just as Blake merged with the Haunter after gazing into the Shining Trapezohedron, Bowen must have served as the vessel, avatar, or “inspired” of the Haunter until his death. The natural cult pattern for 19th-century New Englanders in this context, and the need to masquerade as a “Church,” argues that Bowen served as “minister” or “deacon” to the cult, likely backstopped by an inner circle of “elders.” And indeed we read Lillibridge’s notes referring to “vestrymen” of the Church. The chamber around the Trapezohedron has seven chairs, so the cult likely has six vestrymen and one minister or deacon.

Every other cult appearance mentioned in the lesser literature follows this pattern, of one charismatic leader and a more-or-less organized body of worshipers meeting at a given location. When we add in Lovecraft’s mention of vestrymen, we have something structurally identical to a Protestant church of the reformed or evangelical

traditions. Elders and vestrymen, by the way, are traditionally selected based on their position in society: the title is one of church (or parish) governance, not necessarily special blessing or insight. Thus, Starry Wisdom vestrymen are likely the rich weirdos and scumbags who keep the child sacrifices coming, not necessarily junior avatars of the Haunter. That said, one of the rewards rich or powerful cultists crave is more power, specifically occult power – the overlap between vestrymen and “clerics” is likely greater in the Starry Wisdom context than it might be in a normal Presbyterian or Methodist church.

There may well be even more horrific doctrines reserved for the inner circle, and the communion with the Trapezohedron seems to be so limited. But that said, the Starry Wisdom’s predilection for child abduction probably requires the whole cult’s silence if not active cooperation. This then implies that the whole cult is at least somewhat Mythos-aware, or at least just plain horrible people. By Lillibridge’s estimate, the cult was 97 persons strong in 1845, rising to 207 or more in 1863. 181 cultists left Providence when Mayor Doyle shut down the Starry Wisdom in 1877.

Starry Wisdom Symbology

The cult symbology described by Lovecraft centers on three main elements:

- “the primordial ankh or crux ansata of shadowy Egypt.”
- “seven colossal images of crumbling, black-painted plaster, resembling more than anything else the cryptic carven megaliths of mysterious Easter Island.”
- and, of course, “an egg-shaped or irregularly spherical object” – the Shining Trapezohedron.

The **ankh** traditionally represents life, and even serves as the hieroglyph for that word. Bowen may have simply adopted the ankh to add an esoteric

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Egyptian element to his superficially Christian church, or he may have meant something deeper. Since the Egyptians depicted all their gods with an ankh, it can also symbolize the equality – or identity – of all gods. As the Starry Wisdom believes that all gods are but masks of the Haunter, the ankh becomes a starkly ironic sign in this reading: all gods are Nyarlathotep, and all life is unlife. Some Starry Wisdom offshoots may even use an upside-down or reversed ankh, as depicted in some Egyptian funerary art. The ankh may also represent eternal life or occult knowledge (as a “key to life”), both also ambivalent (to say the least) concepts in the Mythos.

The **seven images** immediately call to mind the seven traditional planets -- and when Bowen established the cult only seven astronomical planets were known, not including Neptune or Yuggoth. Or given the name of the cult, the seven stars of the Pleiades. Lovecraft never identifies the specific stars from which the cult’s titular wisdom derives, but the Pleiades appear significantly elsewhere in the Mythos. In Greek myth, they represent nymphs or (according to Theocritus) Amazons who invented ritual dancing and nighttime festivals. Lovecraft describes the images as similar to the moai of Easter Island – and as it so happens, of the 800+ statues there, only seven (the Ahu Akivi) face the ocean as opposed to looking inland like the other statues.

In a perhaps relevant context, seven pieces of metal hold the **Trapezohedron** in its casket. The word trapezohedron has two meanings, geometric and geological. (“Egg-shaped or irregularly spherical” implies a geological, not strictly geometric, trapezohedron.) A geometric trapezohedron has an even number of kite-shaped faces, like a 10-sided die; a geological trapezohedron may be a geometric trapezohedron or a “deltoidal icositetrahedron,” which has 24 trapezoidal faces. The trapezohedron is one of the naturally appearing forms of quartz crystals, especially garnet – and intriguingly, in Agrippan alchemy quartz

is symbolized by ... the Pleiades. As a vision-granting stone, the Trapezohedron is also a kind of anti-Grail. In this context it’s interesting to note that in 1928 the scholar Walter Stein described the Grail poem *Parzival* as encoding “starry wisdom.”

Other Symbols

Other possible cult symbols might include the **Three-Lobed Eye**, or a **pattern of stars**, given the cult’s name. A more openly Egyptophile version of the Starry Wisdom likely uses an image of the god **Sia** (or Saa), which literally meant “wisdom” (or “perception” or “knowing”) in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Sia’s hieroglyphic sign is a seated man holding a scroll, often surmounted by a further symbol. A “Sia below three stars” emblem almost certainly adorns the altars and perhaps even the brochures of the Astral Wisdom Brotherhood in Los Angeles.

The cult might also make a symbol of **the darkness itself**. Even if the cult does not specifically fetishize the color, it’s likely that the cult robes are black -- or perhaps a red so dark as to be black, that color evoking both ancient blood and the infra-red, the opposite of the hateful light that banishes the Haunter.

Finally, Lovecraft hints that the cult may have worshiped **the void**, or perhaps attempted to depict Nyarlathotep thusly: “one of the windows seemed to shew merely a dark space with spirals of curious luminosity scattered about in it.” The cult minister may have spiral flecks of gold (or some more eerily-coloured mineral) in his or her black robes.

It’s also worth pondering the unknown **“saints”** depicted in the church windows, who “bore expressions distinctly open to criticism.” The Free-Will Baptists who occupied the church previously would have had no truck with such popery; the Starry Wisdom must have painted those images themselves. It’s possible that the “saints” depicted, likely in disguised form, the seven figures mentioned above. At a guess, the “saints” may have included Enoch (after

Dr. Bowen, and a figure associated with occult knowledge), the Prophet Amos (who significantly mentions stellar cults and the Pleiades), Balthazar (one of the Three Magi, traditionally depicted as a black king of the desert), and perhaps a Pharaoh who could be explained away biblically.

VARIATIONS

“THERE HAD BEEN A BAD SECT THERE IN THE OLD DAYS—AN OUTLAW SECT THAT CALLED UP AWFUL THINGS FROM SOME UNKNOWN GULF OF NIGHT.”

– “THE HAUNTER OF THE DARK”

As with the “Gods and Titans” section in the corebook, this compendium is intentionally self-contradictory. Its facts and theories come from Lovecraft, from later writers, and from the universe of possibilities opened up between them.

Antecedents

None of these cults appear in Lovecraft, or (for the most part) in more conventional historical works either. We offer them as possible prior outbreaks of the Starry Wisdom; ignore or alter them at your whim.

Elektran Mysteries (Samoathrace, ca. 1630-1100 B.C.)

After the “Minoan fisher meshed it in his net,” he glimpsed the Trapezohedron and his ecstatic vision led him to the worship of the Haunter. Expelled to the farthest edge of the Minoan realm, he established this mystery cult on the island of Samoathrace in the northern Aegean. (Shortly thereafter, the eruption of the Thera volcano crippled the Minoan empire.) He dedicated his cult to the nymph Elektra (one of the Pleiades), the embodiment of the mysterious mineral amber – another exotic stone with strange powers. Described as both “shining” and “dark-faced” by Hesiod, she was the mother of Harmonia, who according to myth owned a cursed necklace ... or gemstone.



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Also in later myth, Elektra's son Iasion (Iä + Sia?) was considered the traditional founder of the orgiastic and chthonic Mysteries of Samothrace, which replaced the Elektran Mysteries when Lycian invaders smashed that cult on the island around 1100 B.C. The cult's survivors may well have polluted these later Mysteries, which worshiped the nameless "Great Gods" and may have been connected to the Lemnian cult of the Kabeiroi (from the Akkadian *kabiri*, meaning "Great Ones"), mysterious artificer-demons associated with both crabs and the stars – a Mi-Go colony?

If a true Elektran tradition continued disguised in the Samothracian Mysteries, its royal Macedonian patrons may have carried it to the borders of India or deep into Egypt: the Ptolemies devoutly sponsored the Samothrace temple complex. A modern, surviving Elektran cult uses Yuggothic metals and technologies to commune with the Haunter, and to gain covert power in European scientific and military establishments.

Kimahim (Israel, ca. 760-600 B.C.)

The Old Testament Book of Amos contains a number of hints at a dangerous stellar cult, most specifically Amos 5:26:

*But you have borne up Sikkuth, and Moloch, and Kiyun your images, your star gods, which you made to yourselves.*

"Sikkuth" possibly refers to the Babylonian Sakkut, a cupbearer god associated with the planet Venus. "Moloch" is an unknown god likely considered a king or pharaoh associated with transforming fire, and "Kiyun" refers to Kaiwan or Kajjamanu, an unknown god ("the Slow One") associated with Saturn. Amos 5:8 insists that Yahweh commands the stars, especially *Kimah* and *Kesil*: the Pleiades (or the "group" of stars generally) and Orion. (*Kesil* literally means "the gate," a possible reference to the Egyptian word *hotep*, and thus an arrogation of Yahweh's power over that of Nyarlathotep.) The Saturn connection hints that Tsathoggua may be involved, as well.



Amos 5:8 also includes the insistence that Yahweh can "turn midnight into dawn and day into night," perhaps a reference to the cult's infamous "sight that is not sight." Amos' specific mention of "images" may refer to another skrying crystal connected to the Haunter, or to sculptures made by visionary cultists. Such a sculpture could turn up in any archaeological dig in Palestine – or have already surfaced and inspired a new cult lurking within

some church or devout university in the West.

The later Book of Deuteronomy also denounces star-worship (Deut. 4:19), implying that the Kimahim remained active almost until the final destruction of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar. The putative connection of the Kimahim with Nyarlathotep, and hence with Egypt, solves the great mystery of the Deuteronomic period: why the godly king Josiah destroyed his army trying

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to prevent the Egyptians from entering Judah to attack Judah's enemies.

**Ikhwan al-Hikmah al-Thurayya  
(Raqqa, Syria, ca. 720-870)**

The Kimahim may have left traces in the Sabian religion in Syria and Iraq, which among other things worshiped the stars as emanations of God. The Ikhwan al-Hikmah al-Thurayya (Brotherhood of the Wisdom of the Pleiades) occupied an isolated library-observatory in Raqqa, on the site of a former temple of Dagon. The dubious and occult work *al-Hatifi* describes their rites, including human sacrifice and the use of severed heads as oracles.

The cult likely influenced the astronomer Abu al-Abbas Iranshahri (fl. ca. 840) who declared himself a new Prophet after a vision of the angel 'Hasti' revealed to him a new relationship of space, time, and matter. Their cult center destroyed during the fundamentalist Carmathian uprising in Syria around 870, the Ikhwan scattered across the Near East. Their severed-head oracle (actually the mummified head of a priest of Nephren-Ka) survived the cult, to become the Baphomet of the Templars. It still preaches the words of the Black Pharaoh to astronomers at the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh.

**Pratt Hill Coven (Upton, Mass.,  
1692-1724)**

Smashed in Salem and Arkham in 1692, the witch cult scattered into the interior of Massachusetts. One coven practiced its rites in the ancient stone chamber (possibly constructed by Templar refugees in the 13th century, or by ancient Druids pursuing what the bard Taliesin called *syweddydyn* or "starry wisdom") deep in Nipmuc Indian country below Pratt Hill. In medieval times the culmination of the Pleiades (the highest point they reach in the sky) fell at midnight on October 31, already a sacred day to the cult. The seven stones on Pratt Hill align with the setting of

the Pleiades, also important to the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island.

The witches gazed through hyperspace at the Trapezohedron and discovered the Haunter, which they revered with orgiastic rites in the wilderness similar to those of the Elektran and Samothracian Mysteries. As the town of Upton grew, the witches had to meet ever more secretly. When in 1724 one Elizabeth Ackley (or Akeley) accused a number of witches in nearby Connecticut, the coven disappeared again -- before they could be investigated.

**Distribution**

Centered in Providence, Rhode Island from 1844 to 1877, the Starry Wisdom sect fled civic pressure and likely scattered across America. You can thus add a Starry Wisdom offshoot to your campaign city or anywhere else you'd like without outraging textual purists.

Here are a few extra-textual hypotheses from the later Mythos literature, two of which receive more extensive development. Between 1869 and 1871, the Reverend Abednego Mesach Akeley converted his church in Townshend, Vermont to the Starry Wisdom cult but disbanded it after his parishioners revolted. The Starry Wisdom brotherhood mentioned in San Francisco after 1871 may have arrived there from Vermont; it carried out at least some surreptitious trade with Easter Island before the earthquake and Fire of 1906 destroyed it. A Reverend Woolcot expanded the Starry Wisdom church into Arkham in 1873, but his movement never grew beyond parlor spiritualism before his disappearance from a gunshot murder scene that year. Enoch Bowen's granddaughter Asenath nurtured a remnant of the original congregation in Providence until 1926 or thereabouts.

Two impostors (or magical avatars) of Starry Wisdom leaders established spinoff cults after the Providence church shut down. Scotland Yard never tracked down the "Dr. Flagg" who supposedly masterminded the Scarlet Wisdom

sect in Yorkshire in the 1880s. A gaunt, imperious man with oddly porous skin calling himself "Dr. Enoch Bowen" briefly resurrected the Starry Wisdom in 1908 in Arkham, Massachusetts. His eventual fate, and that of his 48 followers, remains unknown; his church was last heard of in 1927.

**Celestial Providence Church  
(Chicago, 1863-1871)**

Radicalized into sheer nihilism by the savagery of the Civil War, seven Starry Wisdom cultists deserted their regiment and established the Celestial Providence Church in a former Baptist church on Grand Avenue north of the Chicago River. Aside from rumors of a "devil-cult" and a number of mysterious disappearances, little is known of the original Celestial Providence; its church burned down in the Great Fire.

The surviving members inherited the property of the church and of its dead congregants, allowing them to move in a better class of society than previously and make connections among the city's artistic and intellectual avant-garde. Descendants of the Celestial Providence still tempt ardent young freethinkers into "study groups" that explore cosmic pessimist philosophy, Eastern religion, and new developments in archaeology and astronomy. These Celestial Providence cells, mostly isolated from each other, meet in libraries and museums such as the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Field Museum. They're always alert for new recruits, and might even hire Investigators to recover an artifact or tome they very much want to study.

**Astral Wisdom Brotherhood (Los Angeles, 1881- )**

In 1881 Douglas V. Wimpole, a former vestryman of the Starry Wisdom in Providence, set up a satellite sect in an adobe mission in the Arroyo Seco, guided by members of the local Hotethk tribe. For two generations, Wimpole's Mission



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de Estrella killed solitary travelers on the road between Pasadena and Los Angeles and worshipped the Haunter under the star-filled desert skies.

In 1919, elder of the church Lannister Dodd replaced Wimpole in what was essentially a coup – Wimpole’s body was never found. With backing from a few Hollywood stars eager for greater wisdom, Dodd bought a mansion on South Normandie (conveniently near Rosedale Cemetery) in the Harvard Heights neighborhood and established the Astral Wisdom Brotherhood for the “study of the true science.” The 1920s wave of Egyptomania and the growth of Hollywood fed the Brotherhood, which extended its tendrils and influence into the studios and Southern California politics. Dodd became a major power broker, sponsoring “retreats” for select donors and eager wannabes; his yacht the *Amun-Shu* carries the faithful on “astral travel” voyages from Long Beach to Easter Island. In the Depression, the Brotherhood’s power has if anything increased, as actors, producers, and writers desperate for work join the sect to advance their careers. The inner circle of the Astral Wisdom continues the rites to the Haunter in the old Arroyo Seco mission, abandoned since 1920 and now overlooked by the Devil’s Gate Dam.

INVESTIGATIONS

This section provides some broad outlines, possible routes Investigators might take through a Starry Wisdom mystery.

Hooks

The Starry Wisdom sect as described by Lovecraft mostly calls attention to itself through its habit (or requirement) of abductions, especially child abductions. Looking into such outrages might lead the Investigators to the cult.

Investigators might also need to free an important or vulnerable NPC from the coils of the cult, or conversely investigate an important or dangerous NPC who turns out to be a mover and

shaker in the modern Starry Wisdom.

The Investigators might also find themselves on the trail of a powerful Egyptian artifact (whether the Trapezohedron or not) held by the Starry Wisdom, or also sought by the sect. The cult might even employ the Investigators to find the artifact, through a false flag like one of the Celestial Providence study groups in Chicago (p. “Celestial Providence Church (Chicago, 1863-1871)” on page 8).

Contrarily, the Investigators might receive such an artifact for analysis, only to find that their client has disappeared. Their client might even drop dead on their office floor holding a mysterious Shining Dingus, the artifact perhaps painted over with black enamel for safety.

Investigators might stumble over the cult’s trail while researching some long-forgotten murder or disappearance, only to discover it remains in business today.

Book-Hounds might be on the trail of the mother lode of occult tomes from the Federal Hill church – and their search might awaken the original owners’ interest.

A rival flim-flam artist might set the Investigators onto the Astral Wisdom Brotherhood (p. page 8) as an act of revenge for a lost mark.

Avenues of Investigation

Looking into the crime scenes (**Evidence Collection, Forensics**), both current (**CopTalk**) and historical (**History, Library Use**) associated with the cult can provide leads to perpetrators, or at least establish a hunting pattern the Investigators can stake out. Afterward, cops might even let a brother Investigator into the creep’s cell for a little private **Interrogation**, to get names of higher-ups the law can’t officially touch.

Lillibridge’s notes include a reminder to “Ask Lanigan for photograph of place taken 1851.” Perhaps photographs reveal some energetic distortion or shifting of the stars overhead during a ritual? (**Photography, Physics**) Any

significant stellar alignments coming up? (**Astronomy**)

Who’s giving the church money? Who’s doing it secretly? Check church ledgers (**Stealth, Locksmith**) and the bank records of suspected rich degenerates. (**Credit Rating 6+, Accounting**)

Between those photos and that break-in, you’d best figure out if the church has a hidden crypt, or if that tower actually conceals a secret vestry. (**Architecture**)

Do birds not settle normally on a building in town? (**Biology, Outdoorsman**) Where did that weird dirt at the kidnap scene come from? (**Geology**)

While you’re looking into rich degenerates, what do their enemies say about them? (**Credit Rating 5+** to collect gossip, possibly along with **Flattery** or **Reassurance**) Is their family history connected with any heterodox religious beliefs? (**Bureaucracy** for vital statistics and church records; **Theology** to recall musty rumors about dusty chapels.)

If the cult has printed a new version of its Aklo scriptures, that involves a significant investment in expensive and conspicuous machinery (**Accounting, Oral History** for rumors of a printing press being unloaded by the old Baptist church) or secret ownership of a printing company. (**Accounting**) The discovery of a mislaid piece of Aklo letter type could be very interesting in a seemingly mundane print shop. (**Evidence Collection, Occult**)

And what’s the word on the street? Neighbors (**Oral History**) and the criminal element (**Streetwise** and perhaps **Intimidation**) may know things they know better than to speak too loudly. (**Assess Honesty**) Are the victims’ belongings turning up at the same fence? Do all the missing kids play in the same vacant lot? (**Languages** come in handy if the cult preys on immigrants as it did in Providence.)

Investigating Bowen’s original expedition (**Archaeology**) could turn up some names of associates

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worth running down in the records. **(Library Use)** Or perhaps someone else is excavating at Hadoth now – who’s behind this new dig? **(Archaeology)**

Find Bowen’s burial site **(History, Library Use)** and perhaps his crypt has a coded message **(Cryptography, Occult)** or some interesting names paying to maintain it. **(Negotiation, probably)**

Breaking the church’s coded journals probably requires both **Cryptography** and **Occult**. In addition to Aklo, cult rites might utilize Hebrew, ancient

Egyptian, or even pre-Classical Greek. **(Languages)**

If the Starry Wisdom traffics in occult items, it may make some money on the side selling mundane but valuable smuggled artifacts. Who handles their smuggling routes **(Streetwise)**, and what artifacts do they decide to keep? **(Art History)** analyzes the goods, and perhaps gives the names of suspiciously connected collectors; **Archaeology** pinpoints the nature of their research by analyzing what’s missing from their sell-offs)

Um, is this egg-shaped stone normal quartz? And is it supposed to glow like that? Where was it quarried, and how recently? **(Geology, Physics)**

The ethnological reports on the Hotethk Indians might provide interesting reading for a wider-ranging California investigation; visiting the few surviving Nipmuc in New England could uncover old lore about Pratt Hill. **(Anthropology)**

And hey, everybody – **Sense Trouble** out there.

### Responses

If the threat can be bought off, suborned, blackmailed, or recruited, the sect tries that first. The Astral Wisdom Brotherhood, at least, has every imaginable inducement at its fingertips – money, sex, power, glamor, drugs, or whatever its enemies might desire most.

Should the Investigators prove obdurate, the sect demonstrates its magical power, most likely summoning a hunting horror to remove the thorniest persecutor.

If the threat is both persistent and seems likely to bring the authorities down on them, the sect pulls up stakes and moves to a new location, leaving sufficient low-ranking (but disgusting) patsies to take the fall for its atrocities.

### Scenario Seeds

The rest of this piece should provide more than enough sparks for a conventional Starry Wisdom scenario complete with rundown church, missing children, influential degenerates, and mystical artifact. Thus, these two seeds instead bookend Lovecraft’s narrative.

### The Shadow of the Trapezohedron

Enoch Bowen didn’t work alone when he excavated Hadoth-on-the-Nile in 1843 and 1844. He had native guides, foremen, and workers who uncovered the hellish glyphs of Nephren-Ka’s buried temple, and who indeed saw the Trapezohedron. Bowen began his rituals in Egypt among his workers, raising up a first cult before the Haunter led him home to Providence.



Unspeakable Cults: The Starry Wisdom

The K.S.S. (from the Coptic for “starry cunning”) resented being left behind. It seduced and suborned the Egyptologist Charles Edwin Wilbour (1833-1896), who arrived in Egypt from Providence in 1880 after the fall of the Tammany ring left him facing scandal at home. He sailed up and down the Nile on his boat *The Seven Hathors*, buying antiquities and digging wherever he could. The cult provided him with rare magical papyri intended to open a channel to Providence, and to bring them across the sea to their promised land. Unfortunately for the K.S.S., Wilbour died in Paris in 1896 and the papyri have not yet been read.

They may be in storage at the Brooklyn Museum (where his widow donated his library and collection), at Brown University’s Archaeology Department, or even in his Paris hotel with his unclaimed property! Until Wilbour’s correspondence was published in 1936, the cult didn’t know what had gone wrong. The K.S.S. now plans to lure another American archaeologist into their toils, reveal the location of Hadoth and the existence of the papyri, and tempt (or force) him to hunt for and finally read their would-be gateway, ideally in Providence. The PCs may be Investigators protecting an innocent, occultists or Tomb-Hounds on the trail of the papyri, or the targets of K.S.S. recruitment themselves!

See *Tomb-Hounds of Egypt* for more on 1930s archaeological conspiracies.

Up From the Blackness

In 1844, the Prussian Egyptologist Karl Lepsius encountered Enoch Bowen south of Giza, and learned something of his latest discovery.

In August 1935, Dr. Ambrose Dexter “threw the curious box and angled stone ... into the deepest channel of Narragansett Bay.”

In 1944, an Ahnenerbe researcher read Lepsius’ detailed notes and diaries, and then studied Providence newspaper reports of the death of Robert Blake in

the 1935 lightning storm and the fate of the “angled stone.”

On May 5, 1945, the Nazi submarine U-853 ignored Admiral Doenitz’ order to cease operations and return to base. Instead it deliberately triggered a suicidal fight with four US Navy vessels off Point Judith, Rhode Island. Oberleutnant Helmut Frömsdorf had carried out his secret orders from the Ahnenerbe, to cover up the salvage by frogmen of the Trapezohedron from the bottom of the channel on April 30.

The Ahnenerbe, remembering the fate of the U-29 in WWI, had Frömsdorf transfer the Trapezohedron to someone else after its recovery. To whom?

- Local Bundists, planning a neo-Nazi revival in the United States.
- A Brazilian or Argentine merchant ship, carrying the Trapezohedron to a new Reich in Paraguay or Antarctica.
- Contacts in the OSS, as a tradeoff for lenient treatment and covert Paperclip recruitment of top Ahnenerbe personnel after the war.

Now, evidence of the U-853’s real orders has somehow reached the Investigators: newly declassified or discovered Ahnenerbe memos, the testimony of a dying German diver, or psychic revelation. And if it’s leaked to the Investigators, you know it’s leaked to the new Starry Wisdom, using their access to dark knowledge and kidnapped children to bribe government officials. So it’s a race to find where the Nazis stashed the Trapezohedron – a race between the Investigators and a cult that will stop at nothing to once more gaze upon its god.

This might be a *Fall of Delta Green* op set in the 1960s, or a modern-day spy story for a *Night’s Black Agents* campaign. It could even be a gigantic hoax mounted by the *Esoterrorists*, planning to immanentize the Lovecraftian eschaton through the Outer Dark.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Starry Wisdom sect first appears in Lovecraft’s last solo story, “The Haunter of the Dark,” although Nephren-Ka first appears of all places in “The Outsider.” Robert Bloch left the Starry Wisdom out of his sequel to *Haunter*, “The Shadow From the Steeple,” but re-skinned the cult for the Seventies in his delightfully over-the-top 1978 novel *Strange Eons*.

Four years later, Richard A. Lupoff presented his own update of the Starry Wisdom, the Spiritual Light Brotherhood of San Diego, in “Documents in the Case of Elizabeth Akeley,” which also acts as a sequel to “The Whisperer in Darkness” for good measure. Stephen Mark Rainey pastiches it as the Church of the Seven Stars in his novel *Balak*.

The cult makes cameo appearances in, among other works, August Derleth’s “Horror From the Middle Span,” Matthew Baugh’s “Mysterious Dan’s Legacy,” Tad Williams’ *Otherland 4: Sea of Silver Light* (as a pure-cloning activist church in Ecuador), Shea and Wilson’s *Illuminatus!* trilogy (as a cult in Equatorial Guinea), and Jack Martin’s otherwise straight Alphonso Clay Civil War mysteries (as a Satanic conspiracy). It’s out there, is what I’m getting at.

Daniel Harms codified much of what is known about the Starry Wisdom in an essay for *Worlds of Cthulhu* magazine; I have tried to walk the line between homage and wholesale adoption of his version of the disliked sect.

Not related to the cult per se, *The Starry Wisdom* is also the title of two overlapping anthologies (1994 and 2012) of Lovecraftian fiction, meditation, and tribute art edited by D.M. Mitchell. *The Starry Wisdom Library* (Nate Pedersen, ed., 2014) is a magnificent and physically beautiful anthology presented as a painstaking pastiche of an 1877 auction catalog for the Starry Wisdom church’s abandoned library of Mythos tomes.

Keepers looking for a model tenebrous conspiracy of depraved ritualists might want to watch the first season of *True Detective*, mentally replacing “Carcosa” with “Shaggai” or “Hadoth.”