

Temple Hill Undercroft

Temple Hill at Snakeden Hollow seems to have been long a focus for worship of a great, serpentine Hydra. Or possibly more than one such creature through the ages. A huge, now ruined, Temple dedicated to such a deity occupies much of the hilltop, with a pair of tall, stone pylons and a paved area reached by steps up the cliffside there (the lower part of these stairs is shown at the road end in the external Undercroft area at the right of this map). That paved area is maintained and used for ceremonies at times by the tall, long-necked, serpentine Lizardfolk who still dwell here, who claim ancestry from the ancient builders, and ultimately the great Hydra itself.

The cavern complex of this map, the “true” Undercroft of the Temple above (although not directly linked to it), is apparently older yet than the Temple, or any of the surviving surface structures at Snakeden Hollow. Whether the Hydra that lives within it is as ancient, or indeed a deity, is unknown. However, it is a gigantic, serpentine creature with twenty heads, which in itself suggests an extreme age. While it is worshipped by the Lizardfolk of the Hollow, this is as much from fear of what it may do, as any benefits it may confer, and much of the efforts of the extensive priestly caste locally (of both priests and assorted attendants) is expended ensuring the Hydra remains calm, well-tended and well-fed. The ruins of the southern part of the external Undercroft district, and all along the southern side of Temple Hill, show what may happen otherwise.

When the mood takes it, the Hydra will leave the caverns (the priests try to ensure this is always by the southern exit) to bask in the sun, though some of its heads are always wakeful, making certain it cannot be surprised. Physically, it is a creature with sandy brown scales over its body, thick enough to act like the toughest metal armour, especially over its back and sides. The scaly plates on its back, necks and heads are a somewhat darker muddy brown, and are notably spiny. It has a spiky, triple tail-tip that rattles when it grows angry, and which it can use like a flailing, heavy mace. Its heads can give very nasty bites from its sharp teeth, but aside from the mass of its great bulk slamming into things, its greatest weapon is its ability to spit corrosive acid from any of its heads when it chooses. The cavern walls, ceilings and floors show evidence of past acid melting in places, sometimes apparently deliberately applied to help adapt and enlarge the cave system without use of tools, and probably done over a very long time.

Many of the cave floors have been smoothed by centuries of wear thanks to the Hydra’s passing, as have some of the walls. Dust and minor debris on the floor often shows the spiral patterns seen in the external ruins, dirt, flattened reeds and grasses, again due to the Hydra’s serpentine motion across the ground. Only a few tunnels in the caves are too narrow for the Hydra to pass through - including those to the Vestry, the Cave of the Ancestors, and the more westerly of the two Captive Caves. The narrowing main circular passage just west of the entrance to the larger, eastern Captive Cave, and that Cave’s narrower entry act as a deterrent to it, but will not stop it if determined. The entrance to the small Centrepoint cave is similarly narrow. The only other Hydra-inaccessible caves are the Treasury and High Cave, whose steep cliff line entrances are too high and vertical for the Hydra to climb, although some of its heads can reach a short way - up to roughly 10 feet (3 metres) - inside either, if it wishes. There is a very distinctive, quite strong, acridly acidic scent throughout the Undercroft complex, strongest in the inner, lower western areas particularly. Most of the interior is unlit away from the entrances, with magical light used by the priests when required. Torches on metal tripod stands are used during ceremonies. Two places within are lit continually, the Cave of the Ancestors, and the Throne Room, with light spilling from both into their adjoining passageways, and, for the Throne Room, some way beyond, as noted later.

Features among some of the caves here were randomly chosen from two Raging Swan Press books, “Dread Thingonomicon” and “Dread Laironomicon”.

A Tour of the Undercroft

Both external entrances are natural cave openings in the roughly 60 ft high (18 m) cliffs, both of which show signs of enlargement over time in places. The southern one is smoother, due to the frequent, repeated passage of the Hydra through it over the ages. Each entry tunnel slopes down at about 15 to 20 degrees, descending a total of 20 ft or so (6 m) by the entrance to Well Cave (south) or the steps up to the Altar Platform (north), where the floors level out, as the ceiling rises into Grand Cavern. Both sloping passageways have irregular ceilings about 15 to 20 ft high (4.5 to 6 m), while **Grand Cavern’s** highest central ceiling is up to 40 or 50 ft (12 to 15 m) above the lowest floor there. **Altar Platform** is not entirely level. The stairs up on its north side rise around 7 ft (2.1 m) from the passage floor, while the bulk of its rounded form stands nearly 9 ft (2.7 m) high along its western edge. The stairs, much like the others in the Undercroft here, are relatively shallowly-angled, somewhat like a many-stepped ramp, and as with the floors, most show signs of long-period wear-smoothing. The large, ancient, rectangular altar stone on the Platform’s top is the focal point for public ceremonies, when locals, and sometimes those from further afield, congregate chiefly in the passageway between the Tunnel and Altar Platforms, mostly on the northern and western sides, closer to the north entrance they are allowed to use into the complex. The altar stone is about 4 ft tall (1.2 m) and undecorated. It

may be specially dressed for ceremonies in a variety of ways. The priests always officiate at such ceremonies, and sometimes the Hydra may be present as well on the Altar Platform. Larger crowds naturally fill more of the lower floor here around Altar Platform, and may even spill over onto the roughly 12 ft (3.6 m) high **Tunnel Platform** across the centre of Grand Cavern, for all its steep sides usually mean a guided detour through the 10 ft (3 m) Tunnel itself, and up the Back Stairs to reach it. While not actively prevented, non-priestly-caste folk in the complex beyond Grand Cavern are rarely present, and would be fair game to become a Hydra snack. Priests typically wear red or purple robes, with armour underneath, while attendants and guards usually wear just armour, within the complex.

Three smaller caves extend south from the southern entry passage, south of the Altar Platform - the Well Cave, Stores and Vestry.

Well Cave is the larger of the trio, with an 18 ft ceiling (5.5 m), and a freshwater well in its southeastern part. Leather and caulked wood buckets stand alongside it, and barrels of water are kept in the west wall's alcove. The water is used by the Hydra and the priests, as well as some of the folk from the external Undercroft village. This is often the freshest-smelling cave in the complex.

The **Stores** cave, an open extension south from the southern entry passageway, is around 12 ft high at most (3.6 m), and contains a scattering of foodstuffs in barrels. Much of this is used by the priests, although it can be fed to the Hydra at times as well. The contents are primarily dried or salted meats and fish, some preserved in oil. It is more heavily-used to stockpile items when a significant festival is approaching, as an overspill store for those others out in the village, such as the truncated-pyramidal building, the only complete external one shown on this map, near the foot of the cliff stairs, by the broadest, old paved roadway.

The **Vestry** is a workshop and items store exclusively for the priestly caste, to supplement what is kept in that external storage building just outside the southern cave entrance. This includes some of the commonly-used robes, items and regalia for ceremonies on the Altar Platform, as well as a spare supply of the long, slender, metal, loosely cattle-prod-like, trident-tipped spears most of the caste carry throughout the complex. These are used to guide and attempt to control the Hydra's movements at times. They each have the power to send a magical electrical charge into whatever their tips touch, when triggered. They are not designed to be used as physical weapons beyond this, although their shafts can be physically extended (using one rod that slide-fits inside the other) to double their lengths to a maximum of 12 ft (3.6 m). The cave's entryway is too narrow for the Hydra to squeeze through, being only some 8 ft high (2.4 m) in places, rising to almost 10 ft (3 m) over its broader inner part.

All the Platform cliffs in Grand Cavern are steep enough, to prevent the Hydra from crawling atop any directly, for all its heads can reach onto their tops easily, if not to all parts of the broader areas. It can though access both Platform tops using the sloping stairways cut into the rock at the northeast corner of Altar Platform, and the Back Stairs.

On the northern side of the Tunnel Platform, those **Back Stairs** rise roughly 8 ft (2.4 m) from the lower floor into a couple of narrower passages, each nearly 14 ft high (4.3 m). One slopes up at about 10 degrees south onto the top of the 12 ft high (3.6 m) Tunnel Platform, the other east into a 16 ft high (4.9 m) small cave, the **Nook**. This is used as a minor refuge at times, or simply as somewhere for contemplation, though it is rarely used at all. It does sometimes act as a waiting place for priests when a ceremony involves the use of both the Tunnel and Altar Platforms.

Across the Tunnel Platform southwards, a narrow passageway with a 9 ft high (2.7 m) opening leads further south then southwest up a set of cut steps somewhat steeper and less worn than others in the complex, which rise about 9 ft (2.7 m) into the 10 ft-ceilinged (3 m) **Cave of the Ancestors**. Torches are kept lit here constantly, set in blackened, Lizardfolk-skull-shaped metal sconces all around the walls. Their light can be seen from the lower passage bend at the foot of the stairs, but barely at all in Grand Cavern. Small niches carefully cut into the walls of this cave at various heights each contain a preserved Lizardfolk skull or mummified head, every one an important ancestor to some of the folk of the Snakeden area. Most have small items with them, including jewellery, which gives each a further mark of identity, for all none are named or labelled. It is common to find one or more local Lizardfolk in here, showing reverence or performing some minor personal ritual, at almost any time. While these can include members of the priestly caste, it is mainly the ordinary villagers who come here to do this.

Much of the western floor of the complex, below Watcher's Platform and the foot of the Grand Stairway, is some 15 ft (4.5 m) lower than the floor of Grand Cavern. **Grand Stairway** only drops about half that distance, as the cave floor between the foot of Back Stairs and the top of Grand Stairway slopes gently down towards the Stairway too (at an angle of 8 degrees or less). The winding tunnel from the southwest corner of Grand Cavern to **Watcher's Platform** is more or less level by contrast, so the cliff drop at the Platform's northwest edge is a sheer 15 ft (4.5 m), which the Hydra cannot climb. There are always priestly guards on watch on the Platform itself when the Hydra is in this part of the complex, as its location affords good views along the circular passageway to west and north, and the cave entrances off it from both. The

Hydra's approach to Grand Stairway is always reported elsewhere immediately, as are other unusual occurrences, such as escape attempts from the Captive Caves. The ceiling over the Platform is approximately 12 ft (3.6 m) high, which continues into the passageway, so the lower circular passage's height reaches almost 30 ft (9 m) in places. The tunnel linking the Platform to Grand Cavern is lower, between 9 and 10 ft (2.7 and 3 m) in its more easterly windings, enough to deter, but not wholly prevent, the Hydra from passing along it.

Facing the Watcher's Platform is the **Bed** cave. This has a steep 10 ft downslope (3 m) to its uneven floor, a height and slope the Hydra can cope with, and this is where it comes to sleep. Much of the floor is covered with mosses, ferns and soft lichens from the swamps, changed regularly by the priestly attendants, as there is something that emanates from this vegetative combination which calms the Hydra especially, so most of its heads will fall asleep. Even so, one or two still keep watch along the passageway above at Bed's entrance. The cave's ceiling is lower than in the passageway, with the entrance about 15 ft high (4.5 m), making Bed cave itself up to roughly 25 ft high inside (7.5 m).

Clockwise around the circuit passage from here are two entrances off the south wall to the pair of **Captive Caves**. Each Cave has only a 10 ft (3 m) ceiling, and both have quite narrow openings into the passage, although only the smaller, western Cave cannot be entered by the Hydra. The Caves each have the indicated number of small, 6 ft high (1.8 m), rusty-iron round cages, large enough to hold only a single prisoner of typical adult Human proportions. Unoccupied ones have open doors with a key in. Any containing prisoners awaiting sacrifice during a forthcoming ceremony, are closed and locked, with the key kept by one of the leading priests. The cages' ironwork is firm and solid despite the rust, their purpose being chiefly to ensure the Hydra does not "accept" sacrifices ahead of the ceremony, as well as to prevent escapes. A few scraps of old cloth and leather from the clothing of former captives can be found on the floor, and maybe a minor trinket or two (at GM's choice), lost among some of the dust and small stones fallen from the walls.

Next cave around the outer periphery is the **Treasury**, where a few chests of precious metals, coins, gems, jewellery and similarly valuable, small, portable objects, are kept. These are used to help cover costs for the upkeep of the priests and the Undercroft community, received as tithes from the wider Snakeden community and other visitors (not necessarily given voluntarily). The vertical entrance cliff reaches nearly 18 ft from the passage floor (5.5 m), which makes it a barrier for the Hydra. Ladder-like, shallow steps have been cut into the cliff near its south end for access, and one of the chests contains ropes for hauling chests up and down the cliff from inside the cave. Its ceiling within is an irregular 12 ft or so (3.6 m).

The Treasury and western Captive Cave both extend off an especially wide, open area along the circular passage, a spot the Hydra sometimes comes to lie and lurk in, with its heads watching both ways along the tunnels, as well as anything interesting happening in either cave.

North along the passage from this place is a broad western opening into **Low Cave**. While its entrance is passage-height, this drops rapidly inside to become just 9 ft (2.7 m) in its interior. The cave has unusually square-cut walls too, which have the look of an old mined area. If there once were precious metals or gemstones in Low Cave's walls, they are long gone now, and no mining has been carried out here in many generations. The place is simply an empty, largely unused, cavern currently, albeit one sometimes forming a refuge, because the Hydra dislikes its low ceiling, so rarely tries to enter it. It is occasionally used as an extra overspill storage space as well.

Northeast a little further along the passageway are two cave entrances opposite one another. On the inner, southeastern, side is **High Cave**, reached by a sheer 18 ft high (5.5 m) cliff, with ladder-steps cut into it, much like those up to the Treasury cave. The Hydra cannot access this as a result, and the 10 ft (3 m) Cave is used for priestly conclaves and similar preparatory meetings, away from prying eyes and ears outside.

The cavern off the northwestern side of this crossway is the **Throne Room**, the largest and most Hydra-accessible cave in the complex, other than Grand Cavern. It has a 45 ft ceiling (14 m), and a broad, rising accessway of steps from the passage. Its floor is about 7 ft (2.1 m) higher than the floor at the foot of the stairs. The Hydra spends a good deal of time in here, and is where oracles, signs and judgements are sought of it from the priests and other querents. Such signs as the Hydra may give are naturally interpreted by the priests first. This cavern has another very significant feature - large numbers of translucent, coloured crystals that dot the walls, sometimes in clusters, all around inside it, producing light in a rich variety of colours that sheds down to the passageway outside and other nearby areas with increasing faintness, including into High Cave. The crystals shatter and become useless shards if removed from the walls. Intriguingly, the riot of coloured light seems to calm and soothe the Hydra, which will never attack any other creature in here, so long as the crystalline lights remain. It comes and goes from here entirely voluntarily, with the priests announcing when it is present, and thus ready to hold audiences.

Along the outer northern side of the passage circuit are three large, broad alcoves, the same rough height inside as the passageway, **The Triplets**. The Hydra may be lurking in one of these, or they may all be

quite empty at any given time. Their outer walls are a little less stable than most others in the complex, and are subject to minor rockfalls fairly frequently, as suggested by the mapped debris there.

Beyond the wide entrance to the Grand Stairway, the final cavern in the outer side of the circular passage is **Centrepoint**, a 15 ft high (4.5 m), oddly square-plan, cave. Its narrower entrance deters, but does not stop, the Hydra from entering, and it seems this cave too, like Low Cave, may once have been a small mined area in the distant past. A little like The Triplets, its outer, here eastern, side wall is a little more prone to minor rockfalls.