

The Convent of Saint Ashanax

(*Shaun Hately*)

The Convent of Saint Ashanax occupies one of the oldest buildings in Ongus – a rare survivor of the period when the city was a northern outpost of the Selentine Empire. It is a solid and impressive structure rising three floors from a site at the intersection of five separate roadways in the southwest corner of the Ward of Groverest.

Until less than a decade ago, the Capstone Guild (see *Players' Guide* p29) used this building as their Guild Hall within Ongus, before moving to their new purpose-built hall to the south of the city, and many were surprised when that avaricious organisation handed this building to the Order of Saint Ashanax, lock, stock, and bridle, without any charge.

Saint Ashanax is the patron saint of wayfarers and travellers, having led a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands from Albion about three hundred years ago. He did not lose a single pilgrim from among the two hundred who he led from Albion to Ibrahim and back but died of illness and exhaustion within a day of the pilgrimage's return to Albish soil.

During the earliest days of the Crusade, it was not uncommon for the wives of some of the noble lords leading the Crusade to accompany their husbands to the Holy Lands – to begin with, many believed the Crusade would face little resistance in the face of the obvious righteousness of its cause. The Order of Saint Ashanax was established by certain widows of some of those recently slain Crusaders who dedicated themselves to providing medical care to those who needed it in memory of their husbands (and often their sons), and in honour of Saint Ashanax. They educated themselves as physicians in the face of opposition from some sections of the Church, and with the enthusiastic support of others. They have established hospitals throughout the Holy Land, where all who need treatment can find it, and while they have not entirely discarded the ancient ideas of medicine passed down from the Emphidian and Selentine sources where they have found they have worked, they have also embraced many new ideas, when they find them of value, even risking accusations of heresy by being all too willing to learn from the greatest scholars of Ta'ashim medicine. Over the last few decades, they have begun building hospitals further and further north, and the Convent of Saint Ashanax in Ongus is one of these hospitals – one that is rapidly acquiring a reputation as the place to go if you wish the best possible, non-magical chance of surviving illness or injury.

Most people believe the women who run this convent and hospital are Nuns – that is not strictly true. They call themselves Oblates, and they take their oaths for only a year at a time – some will renew these oaths for their entire life, but an Oblate is free to leave the Order if they wish, and there are already a few women practising as private physicians in Ongus who gained their training as Oblates of Saint Ashanax. This has caused concern among the universally male Guild of Barber Surgeons, but the Guildmaster himself is a relatively enlightened man who would rather cooperate with the Order than conflict with it.

The Superior of the Convent is Sister Carida, a woman in her mid-sixties with a dignified and inspiring manner. At any given time, there are about a dozen sisters in total whose skills range from basic nursing, all the way up to highly competent surgeons and apothecaries, and a similar number of girls serving as novices and apprentices. There are also at least a couple of sisters who seem to wear maille and bear swords under their habits – former Lady Knights who ensure things remain peaceful within the convent walls.

The convent is built of Selentine brick. Most will enter via a heavy double door that brings a person into a room lined with cots where the Sister in attendance can provide initial care and decide whether a person needs to be admitted for treatment. Nobody is ever refused entry, and all are treated according to their need. A fee is levied on discharge based primarily on a person's ability to pay – it can be as little as a single copper penny, or as much as hundreds in gold. Off this lobby is one where surgery can be performed when necessary. There is a chapel next to this lobby and doors leading further into the building. Beyond those doors are a kitchen (which serves the needs of both patients and Oblates with nourishing soups), a laundry – the Oblates are great believers in cleanliness – a store room for linens, and two small wards – one for the use of men and one for women (although the Oblates ever practical nature means that they will not leave a bed empty if a person needs it, simply because that person is not of the requisite gender – it is something of a running joke in Ongus that the Oblates of Saint Ashanax are respecters of nobody's privacy or modesty in the face of medical need. A narrow annex (that rises the same three floors as the main building) accommodates a library dedicated to medical and other useful books – on this floor there is a desk at which a Sister can often be found making copies of important works. There is a staircase to the cellars (described later), a well shaft that climbs the entire building, and a spiral staircase that provides access to higher floors.

The first floor above contains two more, normally sex-segregated wards, and private rooms for patients. There is another room for storing clean linen, and the annex is dedicated to the apothecary's art – medicines are prepared here, according to both ancient custom where such custom has not been proven worthless, and new treatments are explored. The Oblates make great use of honey as a base for medicines and as a substance to be spread under dressings as they believe it can help to prevent wounds from festering. There is a storeroom for medicines that have been prepared.

The second floor is the living quarters of the Oblates. Novices have a dormitory here (although some are allowed to return to their families in the city each night) but the sisters live in single cells, simple but comfortable. Sister Carida has a small suite of rooms. There is a solid vault attached to this room, in which the valuables of the Convent are stored, including an extremely powerful relic, the upper-left leg bone of Saint Ashanax. The Oblates, in general, and Sister Carida in particular, prefer to rely on non-religious methods of treating illness and injury, and non-magical ones as well – this is largely because they believe that these methods can be taught and learned more readily than others and so spread more easily. But they do not completely oppose these approaches, and in extremis, the relic may be tried – nobody within the Order is known to have any magical abilities, but it is not completely unknown for them to be associated with those who are. The annex on this floor is a room where novices may study.

On top of the building, and accessed by the spiral staircase, is a dome constructed of a lead-and-iron framework set with hundreds of thin sheets of horn that admit light. Beneath this dome, a herb garden has been planted with those herbs that are known (or at least strongly believed) to have medicinal value.

The cellar of the building contains entrances to the ancient Selentine sewer system of Ongus – this building was originally used to manage those sewers during the Selentine period. The room is kept scrupulously clean – there is a large bathing pool here, and also the latrinas for the use of those living or staying in the convent. Ancient machinery, maintained by the Capstone Guild, remains here, but the Order has added an icehouse where bodies of the recently departed can be kept pending their final disposition. A trap door in the ceiling provides lift access to the street outside the convent door for moving heavy objects to and from the cellar.

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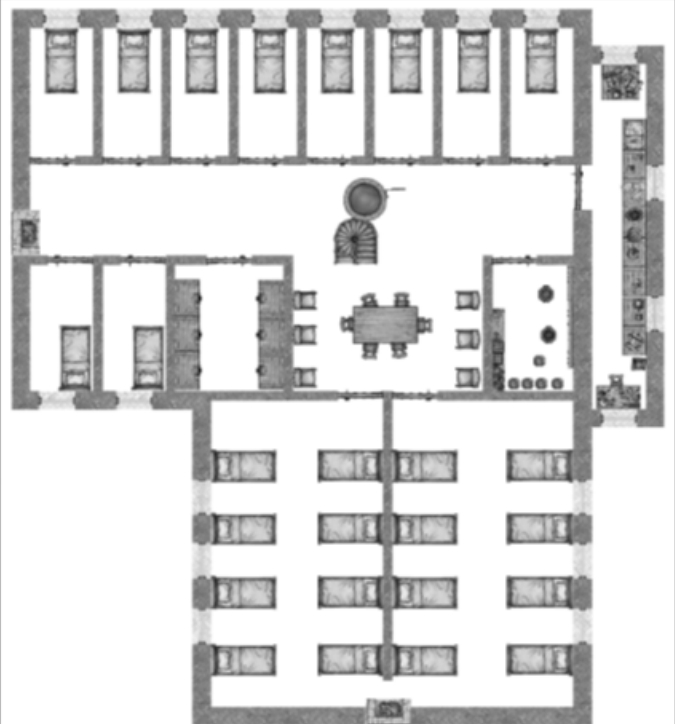
(Ongus, Albion, cAS997)



Dome



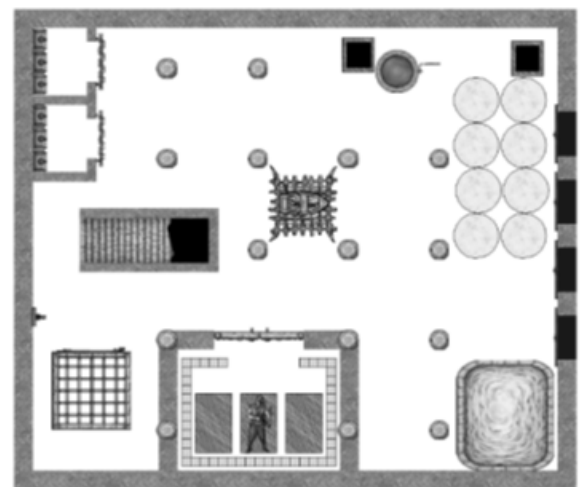
Second Floor



First Floor



Ground Floor



Cellar

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