

TRAVELLER

A PLAYER'S GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF CHARTED SPACE

A spoiler-light introduction for players new to Mongoose Traveller 2nd Edition

You do not need to memorize this guide.

It exists to give you the big picture: who came before the Third Imperium, why there are humans all over Charted Space, why ancient ruins matter, and why the galaxy feels old, complicated, and lived-in.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Traveller takes place in a very old interstellar civilization built on top of even older civilizations. The stars are charted, but they are far from completely understood.

1. First: What Is Charted Space?

“Charted Space” is the broad region of the galaxy in which most Traveller adventures take place. It contains thousands of inhabited worlds, many different interstellar powers, and an enormous amount of history.

There is no single unified galactic government. The Third Imperium is one of the largest and most influential states, but it shares the map with other major civilizations such as the Zhodani Consulate, Solomani Confederation, Aslan Hierate, Vargr states, Hiver Federation, and the K’kree Two Thousand Worlds.

A USEFUL MINDSET

Think less “one galactic civilization” and more “an Age of Sail map stretched across the stars.” Borders matter, travel takes time, communication is slow, and distant authorities cannot instantly solve local problems.

The date most new campaigns care about

The traditional Mongoose Traveller 2nd Edition setting begins around Imperial Year 1105. The Third Imperium is more than a thousand years old, appears stable, and dominates a huge portion of known space—but tensions are building along several frontiers.

More recent Mongoose material advances the setting into the Fifth Frontier War beginning in 1107. Your Game Master will tell you exactly when and where your campaign begins.

Three things to remember before the history lesson

- Human beings have lived on many worlds for thousands of years.
- Several major civilizations existed long before the Third Imperium.
- Ancient ruins can be hundreds of thousands of years old—and may contain technology no modern civilization fully understands.

2. The Ancients: Before Recorded History

Roughly 300,000 years before the modern Traveller era, an advanced civilization known simply as the Ancients operated across a vast region of space.

Their technology was far beyond anything normally available in the Third Imperium. They manipulated worlds, moved species between planets, and left behind machines and installations that modern scientists often struggle to explain.

The Ancients are also one reason humans can be found on so many worlds. Long before humans on Terra developed spaceflight, Ancient activity transplanted human populations to distant planets. Over immense spans of time, these populations became separate branches of Humaniti with their own cultures and histories.

The Ancients eventually destroyed themselves in a catastrophic conflict generally called the Final War. Their civilization vanished, leaving scattered ruins, mysteries, and dangerous relics behind.

WHY PLAYERS CARE

An Ancient site is not just an archaeological curiosity. It can contain technology centuries—or hundreds of thousands of years—beyond modern understanding. Governments, corporations, scholars, and criminals may all kill to control one.

3. Humanity Reaches the Stars—More Than Once

After the Ancients disappeared, the human populations they had scattered across space developed independently. Some eventually discovered jump drive and built interstellar civilizations long before Terra did.

The Vilani

The most historically important of these early human civilizations arose on Vland. The Vilani developed jump technology thousands of years before Terra and gradually expanded across an enormous region of space.

Their civilization valued stability, continuity, and control. Over time they created the Ziru Sirka, later called the First Imperium. It was vast, wealthy, sophisticated—and increasingly resistant to change.

Vilani influence never really disappeared. Even thousands of years later, many worlds, trade routes, institutions, languages, and populations inside the Third Imperium still carry Vilani cultural roots.

Other civilizations were growing too

The Vilani were never alone. Other peoples developed their own interstellar societies:

- The Zhodani built a powerful human civilization in which psionics became an accepted part of government and society.
- The Vargr spread across large regions coreward of the Imperium, forming countless shifting states, alliances, and corsair bands.
- The Aslan expanded through clan-based societies in which land and territory have immense cultural importance.
- The Hivers developed a sophisticated federation famous for diplomacy, social engineering, and subtle influence.
- The K'kree created the Two Thousand Worlds, a huge civilization shaped by herd behavior and a deep cultural hostility toward meat-eating species.

NEW-PLAYER TAKEAWAY

Traveller is not “humans versus aliens.” Humaniti itself is culturally diverse, and many non-human civilizations are older, larger, or more sophisticated than newcomers might expect.

4. Terra Arrives Late—and Changes Everything

When humans on Terra finally developed jump drive, they expected to discover the unknown. Instead, they discovered that interstellar humanity had already existed for thousands of years.

Terran explorers encountered the enormous Vilani First Imperium. Even more shocking, they eventually concluded that Terra was the original homeworld of all Humaniti.

The Interstellar Wars

Relations between Terra and the Vilani deteriorated into a long series of conflicts known as the Interstellar Wars. At first, Terra was tiny compared with the First Imperium.

But the Vilani state had become rigid and slow to adapt. Terrans proved unusually willing to innovate, improvise, absorb new technology, and change tactics. Over generations of warfare, Terra pushed deeper into Vilani territory until the impossible happened: the smaller Terran civilization defeated the enormous First Imperium.

The Rule of Man—the Second Imperium

Terran leaders inherited a gigantic empire they were not fully prepared to manage. The resulting state became known as the Rule of Man, or Second Imperium.

The new rulers broke apart many old Vilani restrictions and spread Terran influence widely. But they also weakened systems that had kept an enormous interstellar economy functioning. Administration became more difficult, trade networks frayed, and the Second Imperium eventually collapsed.

THE RECURRING TRAVELLER PROBLEM

Space is enormous. Even with faster-than-light travel, information does not move instantly. A government can rule thousands of worlds and still wait weeks or months to learn what is happening on its own frontier.

5. The Long Night

After the Second Imperium collapsed, much of human space entered a period called the Long Night. For roughly seventeen centuries, large-scale political unity disappeared across huge regions.

This was not one single apocalypse. Different worlds had very different experiences. Some retained advanced technology and thriving local governments. Others became isolated, lost industrial capacity, suffered wars, or fell to much lower technological levels.

Small federations, kingdoms, republics, corporate states, and pocket empires rose and fell. Entire regions developed local cultures with little contact beyond a few neighboring systems.

WHY TRAVELLER WORLDS CAN FEEL SO DIFFERENT

One planet may be a wealthy high-tech democracy. Two jumps away could be a hereditary monarchy, a corporate mining colony, a military dictatorship, or a world that has spent centuries recovering from isolation. All of them may share ancient historical connections.

6. The Third Imperium

Eventually, a successful interstellar state called the Sylean Federation began reconnecting and stabilizing nearby systems. Its most important ruler, Cleon Zhunastu, founded the Third Imperium in Imperial Year 0 and became Emperor Cleon I.

The Third Imperium expanded rapidly, but it learned an important lesson from the past: trying to directly manage every detail of thousands of planets is nearly impossible.

How the Imperium actually works

The Imperium is powerful between the stars, but local worlds usually govern themselves. Imperial authority is most concerned with interstellar trade, borders, starports, major law, taxation, diplomacy, and defense.

That means two neighboring Imperial worlds can have completely different laws, governments, customs, and technology levels—and both can still be loyal members of the same Imperium.

Communication is slow

The Imperium relies heavily on the X-Boat communication network. X-Boats carry information through jump space, but they still take time to travel. There is no instant galaxy-wide internet.

A crisis can begin, escalate, and even end before the central government hears the first report. Local nobles, admirals, scouts, corporations, and planetary governments therefore possess far more practical independence than their titles might suggest.

7. The Modern Political Situation

By the early 1100s, the Third Imperium has survived for more than a millennium. It is enormously powerful, but it is not invulnerable. Several old rivalries remain unresolved.

The Solomani

The Solomani are strongly connected to Terra and Terran identity. Political tensions eventually produced the Solomani Confederation, a major human power bordering the Imperium. The two fought the Solomani Rim War, and the Imperium ultimately captured Terra itself.

So humanity's original homeworld is controlled by the Third Imperium while the Solomani Confederation remains nearby. Unsurprisingly, relations are complicated.

The Zhodani

On the opposite frontier, the Third Imperium faces the Zhodani Consulate. Zhodani civilization openly accepts and trains psionic abilities—especially among its ruling classes.

The Imperium, by contrast, became deeply suspicious of psionics after its own historical Psionics Suppressions. The political and cultural divide between the two powers has helped fuel repeated Frontier Wars.

The Fifth Frontier War

The traditional Traveller starting year, 1105, sits just before another major conflict. In 1107, the Fifth Frontier War begins as Zhodani forces and their allies clash with the Imperium in the Spinward Marches.

Not every campaign takes place near the war, and your character does not need to know its details. What matters is that the setting is not frozen in time: alliances shift, borders are contested, and distant political events can create opportunities—or problems—for ordinary travellers.

IMPORTANT

Your GM may set the campaign before, during, or away from the Fifth Frontier War. You only need to know the history your character would reasonably know.

8. The Big Timeline

You do not need these dates memorized. This is simply a one-page reference for the major eras.

Approx. Date	Era / Event	Why It Matters
~300,000 years ago	The Ancients	An impossibly advanced civilization spreads species and leaves mysterious technology behind.
Thousands of years ago	Vilani expansion	The Vilani reach the stars and build the civilization later called the First Imperium.
Before Terra's space age	Other major powers rise	Zhodani, Vargr, Aslan, Hivers, K'kree, and others develop their own interstellar histories.
~2,400 years before Year 0	Terra reaches the stars	Terrans discover that other humans already inhabit a vast interstellar civilization.
Following centuries	Interstellar Wars	Terra defeats the Vilani First Imperium.
~2,200 years before Year 0	Second Imperium	Terran rulers establish the Rule of Man.
~1,776 years before Year 0	The Long Night begins	The Second Imperium collapses and interstellar society fragments for centuries.
Year 0	Third Imperium founded	Cleon I establishes the Imperium that dominates the modern setting.
600s	Civil war and X-Boats	The Imperium survives internal conflict; the X-Boat network becomes its communication backbone.
990–1002	Solomani Rim War	The Imperium defeats the Solomani and takes control of Terra.
1105	Classic campaign era	The traditional Mongoose Traveller 2e starting point.
1107–1110	Fifth Frontier War	A major Imperial–Zhodani conflict erupts in the Spinward Marches.

9. What This Means for You as a Player

You are not expected to play a historian. Most Traveller characters know the broad outline of history in the same way a modern person might know about Rome, the Middle Ages, major world wars, and current international rivalries.

The five ideas worth remembering

- The galaxy is old. People have been travelling between stars for thousands of years.
- The Third Imperium is powerful, but it does not control everything and does not govern every world the same way.
- Travel and communication take time. Distance creates independence, uncertainty, and adventure.
- Ancient ruins and forgotten civilizations are real parts of the setting, not legends.
- A “charted” star system can still contain lost installations, forgotten colonies, unexplained signals, political secrets, or things nobody has properly investigated in centuries.

What is a Traveller?

A Traveller character is usually someone whose life takes them between worlds: a merchant, scout, veteran, scientist, agent, noble, drifter, explorer, mercenary, criminal, diplomat, or simply someone trying to make the next ship payment.

You do not need to save the galaxy. Traveller stories are often about capable people dealing with local problems while enormous civilizations, governments, corporations, and ancient mysteries exist in the background.

THE TONE TO KEEP IN MIND

A Traveller adventure can begin with a cargo contract, a missing person, or an overdue mortgage payment—and end with the crew discovering that the “empty” system on the map has been hiding something for thousands of years.

Mini-glossary

Humaniti: The collective term for the many branches of humanity found across Charted Space.

Jump drive: Faster-than-light travel. Ships enter jump space and normally emerge about a week later.

Parsec: The basic unit used for interstellar distance on Traveller maps. A ship's Jump rating determines how many parsecs it can cross in one jump.

Third Imperium: The large interstellar empire at the center of the classic Traveller setting.

Imperial Year: The dating system used by the Third Imperium. Year 0 marks its founding.

X-Boat: A specialized courier ship used to move information through the Imperium.

Ancients: A vanished civilization from roughly 300,000 years ago whose technology remains mysterious and extremely advanced.

Welcome to Charted Space.

The map is known. The story is not.