

Cthulhu DARK AGES

GUIDE TO ENGLAND

Cthulhu Dark Ages is Chaosium's Middle Age's^I supplement for the *Call of Cthulhu* Role-Playing Game line. Written by Stéphane Gesbert, and originally published as *Cthulhu 1000AD* by Pegasus Spiele, it explores the Lovecraft mythos set in the early medieval era. This document, *Cthulhu Dark Ages: Guide to England*, suggests additions and changes to the setting's rules and highlights, albeit briefly^{II}, life in England during this period.

ENGLAND 1001 AD

The following is a brief introduction to the world of Dark Ages England^{III}. While the information presented here is the result of research across a number of sources, it is likely that these are just general approximations of life and society in this period. Most importantly, nothing written here should be seen as being 'set in stone', and, as always, Keepers and players should adapt history to meet their needs at the game table.

ENGLAND AS IT IS KNOWN

Æthelred (the Unready) sits upon the English throne, and although an experienced ruler, he reigns over a great decline in the country's fortunes. Barely thirty years before, Edgar the Peaceful - Æthelred's father and grandson of the legendary Alfred the Great - successfully unified England into a grand single kingdom. Now, however, as the world approaches the end of the first millennium since the birth of Christ, the country faces not only renewed dangers from the Danes (Vikings), but from those who look to rebel against their ineffectual king.

PRIOR TO 950AD

England is a nation of settlers and change, the invaders of previous centuries - the Angles, Jutes and Saxons - now completely dominate society and are known as the Anglo-Saxons. In the north, the Danelaw (the Danish settled lands in the 9th century) has fallen to the might of successive kings of Wessex - Edward the Elder, Æthelstan, and Edmund.

THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

In just two generations much of the peace and prosperity paid for by the blood of English men has been shattered.

- 952 - King Eadred unites Northumbria with the rest of England.

^I Historians don't like calling this period the 'Dark Ages' for some reason, and prefer the term 'early Middle Ages'.

^{II} As best one can for a period shrouded in the mist of time, anyway.

^{III} This English kingdom follows approximately the same borders as the country known as England does today. I.e. excludes Scotland and Ireland, and contains only parts of Wales (which, while separated by laws and traditions, shares many common bonds.)

- 954 – The death of Erik BloodAxe sees a respite from the Viking raids.
- 957 – King Eadwig feuds with Dunstan, Abbot of Glastonbury (who later becomes the Archbishop of Canterbury and Saint Dunstan). Rather than allow the country to descend into civil war, he crowns his younger brother, Edgar, as king of all lands north of the Thames.
- 959 – King Edgar becomes the sole King of England (although he will not be crowned such until 973) and restores Benedictine Rule to the monastic orders of the nation.
- 973 – Edgar’s coronation sees England reunited, with the Saxon’s supremacy over the nation asserted by eight sub-kings (including Welsh, Scot and Dane) rowing the new King up the River Dee.
- 975 – Edgar dies. Although the succession is disputed, Edward, Edgar’s eldest son, is crowned King.
- 978 – Edward is murdered by supporters of Æthelred (Edgar’s younger son) with the young King crowned at the age of 10.
- 980 -82 –Danish (Viking) raiders return to England (perhaps as a result of religious changes in Denmark).
- 988 – Further Viking raids, with a battle in Devon between the Danes and local defenders.
- 991 – The Year of Unrest
 - The Battle of Maldon sees the Saxons defeated and allows the Danes to raid unopposed.
 - Æthelred begins a policy of ransom to keep the Danes away (Danegeld).The first ransom of 10,000 pounds is paid.
 - Pope John XI resolves tension between England and Normandy, having arisen from Norman ports allowing the Danish raiders safe harbour.
- 994 – Battle of London is inconclusive, with a treaty signed between Æthelred and the Danish leader Olaf Tryggvason for 22,000 pounds. Olaf agrees to never return to England – a promise he upholds – while other Danes remain as mercenaries for the English King.
- 997-1000– New raids (perhaps from turncoat Danish mercenaries) across southern England, although no ransom is paid. The raiders eventually depart, although the seeds of future conflict will surely arise from Æthelred’s deeply rooted hatred of the Danes!

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS?

Æthelred’s hold on England is tenuous at best, and the threat of the Vikings is a constant and terrifying one. How long this weak king can keep the country united, or what rash action he might take against the Danes, worries the nobility. England faces a time of great unrest, ripe for rebellions and uprisings, intrigue and nefarious dealings, all of which does much to cover the motivations and actions of those who worship older, darker things...

ANGLO SAXON SOCIETY

As can be expected, life in Anglo Saxon England was hard, brutal and often short. That said, this period of history was still one of culture and learning, at least for those educated or rich enough to have the free time to pursue such leisure. Structurally all English society was based around responsibilities, tithes and land rents (food) that passed up the class ladder, in return for access to land and freedoms.

PEOPLE OF ENGLAND

The arrival of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in Britain in the 6th century was the death nail of what remained of the Roman culture on the island. While this subjugation wasn't as exactly one of slaughter and oppression, the masses of arriving Germanic peoples saw the traditions of the British wane almost to extinction.

But these newcomers were not a united people, and each tribe strove to claim their own lands in this strange new world. By 800AD these forces had solidified into seven kingdoms - Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex - each of which, under a succession of rulers, rose and then fell in the domination of England.

The arrival of the great Danish army in the 9th century seemed to herald the end of the Anglo Saxon people. It was only with rise of Alfred of Wessex (known thereafter as Alfred the Great) that England united under one banner.

It is now the turn of the millennium and England remains united, but despite their dominance are not the only people live in the land.

- **Danes** - The term Danes is a generic term for the Scandinavian raiders that first started arriving in England in the 7th century. In the middle of the 9th century these raids changed to become full occupations, and result in a series of wars. These wars both united the English as one and formed the Danelaw, a great swathe of north under the rule of the invaders. While this Danelaw was slowly but surely taken back, the descendants of these settlers still occupy the lands.
- **Welsh** - Never fully conquered by the Romans, Wales remained much as it had for the past thousand years. The Welsh have their own laws and traditions, and at various times in English history have been allies, enemies and simply ignored (with Offa's Dyke a testament to this final option).
- **Britons of Galloway & Strathclyde** - Celtic Northerners who are all that remain of the Britons. Although these kingdoms seem to be on the edge of extinction, they form a barrier between the newly formed Scotland^{IV} and the rest of England.
- **Irish** - More a collection of disparate tribes than a single people, the Irish have only recently shaken off the yoke of Danish oppression for the second time. Now Brian Boru, the King of Cashel, looks to unite his country, sending many of those fleeing this change into England.
- **Cornish** - Descendants of the Britons and Romano-British Celts, the Cornish were conquered by the Kingdom of Wessex late in the 9th century. Despite this the people of Cornwall remain fiercely independent and as recently as 950AD still fought to ensure their lands remained their own.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Anglo Saxon England had, like all large social groups, a stratified hierarchy. From the king through to the lowest slave, each person knew what his rank allowed him to do, and what responsibilities it demanded. Of course, the exact privilege and responsibilities of each rank depended greatly on where the person lived and the number of people each such a locale supported.

^{IV} Formed from the Pict and Scot empires, which like most of the island had been ravaged by Viking raider over the previous centuries.

- **King** – England was first united under the reign of Alfred the Great, the king of Wessex, and remained so as successive leaders took back the land conquered by the Danes. Even when foreigners claim the throne (such as Cnut or William), England is forever to remain one nation.
- **Athelings** – Relatives of the king, and often his most influential supporters and scathing detractors.
- **Eoldermen** (Eorls/Earls) – The highest level of aristocracy, Eoldermen were delegated land and legal rights by the King in return for collecting the taxes and tithes. Additionally, Eoldermen were military leaders and responsible for raising the Fyrd (militia) in war. By 1000AD many of the Eoldermen had consolidated their power, by controlling large areas of land and even other Eoldermen, and this in turn made them almost as influential as the King.
- **Thegns** (Thanes/Nobles) – Originally the retainers of the Anglo Saxon aristocracy, Thegns changed with the centuries to become landowners in their own right. The main role of a Thegn was as a soldier, and to provide warriors to the Fyrd.
 - **Lesser Thegns** – Over the centuries the ranks of the Thegn class grew, and with it their allegiances changed. By the turn of the millennium, most important leaders, both Eoldermens and Bishops, could call on their own Thegns to support their interests; a power paid for with the allocation of lands. Eventually, some Thegns would grow powerful enough as to command other Thegns.
 - **King's Thegns** – As the ranks of the Thegns grew, the original meaning of the role - the companions of the King - was diluted. To differentiate normal (lesser) Thegns from those who still held this traditional role, the title of King's Thegns become common parlance. As can be expected, King's Thegns answered only to the King (only he could pass judgement on them) and soon became important lesser nobles of the kingdom.
- **Reeve** – With the growth of power within the ranks of the Eoldermen and the church, the King looked to others to ensure his interests in town and other important settlements. In such communities, Reeves were the local magistrate and tax collectors, and acted only in the interest of the King. Of course, not to be out done, the most powerful Eoldermen soon began to appoint their own Reeves.
- **Churls** (Ceorls/Freemen) – The freemen of Anglo Saxon society. Churls had a number of ranks within the social group, and the actual power of each depended greatly on where in England they lived.
 - **Geneat** – The peasant aristocracy, the Geneat were most often the overseers of the Thegn's land. They paid land rent to their masters, and were responsible for the actions of the Gebers under them.
 - **Kotsetla** (Cotsettler) – Landless freemen who exchanged their labour or skills in return for food and accommodation. These are craftsmen, soldiers and merchants that relied on the Thegn's patronage to survive.
 - **Geber** (Gebur) – The farmers and stockmen who held small parcels of land in their Thegn's name. Responsible for producing land rent, usually in the form of crops and animals, they were the largest social class in England.
- **Thralls** (Slaves/Bondsmen) – Despite the term, Thralls had many rights. They could earn money working for others (when time allowed) and could even own property. Freemen

often sold themselves into bonds, especially when times were hard. Most Thralls sold their bonded labour for a set period of time, and could buy their freedom (or be freed by their master, as would happen when the Thegn was on their deathbeds).

THE CHURCH

By 1000AD the church in England was once more a powerful entity, although it still looked to the King for favour. Divided into two provinces, York and Canterbury, each province commanded a number of dioceses based on the divisions of the land. Archbishops headed the provinces (with Canterbury being the more important) and Bishops assigned to each diocese.

Within the church, priests worked amongst the people and ran the parishes, and were responsible for leading mass and taking confession. Within each parish, there were a number of junior roles (known as the minor orders) and lay positions for Churls within the community. In general, the church would look to support the poor and infirm, and in turn looked to the local Thegns and Eoldermens for authority (often land rents were directly assigned to the local parish).

The belief of the one true God is almost universal, with the age of the pagan long past. As such, the church had great influence amongst the people, and with it could raise or remove a Thegn from power.

The other important form of religion in England was the Monastic Orders. With the re-unification of the country under Edgar in the middle of the 10th century, the rule of the Benedictine Order had been restored (in other words all monasteries once more had to follow the strict rules as laid down by St Benedict in the 6th century), and was once more a powerful influence on the noble class. The monasteries also ruled great tracts of land (as was tradition, Thegns, Eoldermen and even Kings would often give land to these orders in their wills), and would rent directly to Churls (therefore bypassing the normal social order). While the monasteries were often the providers and supporters to the community, the numbers of monks dwindled over the years, consolidating their power and influence in the hands of a few even further.

COMMUNITIES

Home life for the Anglo Saxon was squarely focused around the village. These small and functional communities often centred on the local lord's estate (be it a Thegn, Eolderman or the church), but would also grow around important harbours, crossroads or other geographical locations.

The large communities, places of trade and commerce, were by this time almost exclusively restricted to the fortified towns known as Burhs. These larger communities arose as places to rally the Fyrd and provide protection in times of trouble. They grew in number during the wars with great Danish army, and then further under the plans set down by Alfred the Great. Often built around older fortifications (such as those left by the Romans), these towns were surrounded by walls and ditches, and designed to hold out against sieges. Although often originally the seat of the local Eolderman, by 1000AD the King had a vested interest in the Burhs, and many were held by a Reeve.

Additional fortifications existed in the guise of Emergency Burhs. These defensive points acted as a fall back or rallying location in the case of surprise attacks or the fall of the local Burh. Often built around sites of the old hill forts, they represented a last line of defence.

England also had a number of major cities, such as York and London. London has always been an important location, even prior to the arrival of the Romans, and it was under the auspices of Alfred the Great that London became the country's capital. Although not large by European standards, these cities are vital cogs in the country's international relationships, and continue to grow over this period.

MONEY & TRADE

As has been noted above, trade, especially in the form of land rents, were a vital part of English society. All Gebers had a responsibility to produce food for their masters, who in turn were responsible for paying the King, church or other important figures. Land owners of all classes also ensured that non-food producing freemen would be provided for (in return for their goods and services), and in times of need would provide charity. Failure to maintain these traditions resulted in harsh fines, and could see a Thegn or even an Eoldermen dispossessed of their land.

Of course, beyond the land rent, normal trading would take place in the villages, burhs and cities. Currency was widely used to secure all types of goods and services, with the base unit being the silver penny, and twelve pennies, to the shilling (although shilling coins were rarely issued). By the reign of Æthelred, halfpence and farthings were commonly used (the actual penny being cut in half or quarters as required).

LAW & ORDER

Despite what one might think of England in the Dark Ages, life, especially for a free man, was very ordered. Not only did rank dictate a man's privilege, it also bestowed them with a weregild; the value for the man's life^V. Weregild ensured that if someone was injured or killed, the guilty would pay restitution to the victim's family, ensuring further blood shed was avoided.

Beyond the Weregild, a system of fines for other minor 'crimes' existed. With the Reeves and Eoldermen responsible for maintaining order, having charge of acts such as 'drawing your sword in a meeting' or 'binding a churl without reason' ensured that society continued to function without a rapid descent into violence and war.

REFLECTING DARK AGES ENGLAND IN PLAY

As written Cthulhu Dark Ages presents the cultures and setting of France and the Holy Roman Empire, as opposed to the more isolated England. The following advice and optional rules are suggested to better facilitate running Cthulhu Dark Ages scenarios in England.

ADVICE ON CREATING APPROPRIATE CHARACTERS

Investigators - and I use that term loosely - in Cthulhu Dark Ages are a different breed than their more modern counterparts. During this period of history, the permanent migration of people was slowing down (especially after the mass population movements of the 5th and 6th Centuries) and at a local and regional level most free men and women rarely travelled far from their homes (barring exceptional circumstance). The rise of food rents also limited the opportunities to travel; you and your family had to work doubly hard to ensure that you could not only pay these rents, but ensure you could feed yourself over the winter. Add in the inherent difficulties in actually travelling the land, and the reasons to investigate mysteries, especially those not within one's own town or village^{VI}, are limited.

To mitigate this historical limitation on travel, and 'adventuring', it would be thoroughly advantageous to both the Keeper and the players if reasons for investigation are built into the characters during generation, especially in line with the types of scenarios being proposed. There are many ways of achieving this, from simply stating that a character is a Churl looking for land to rent, a trader or

^V Weregild also extended to a man's property.

^{VI} As even by this time most of the noble class has settled into semi-permanent estates, as opposed their early nomadic age, where they relied on the hospitably of their landed subjects

merchant who travels for business or even a Thegn protecting his lands. Priests and monks also travelled with some regularity, as did sailors and mercenaries (these often being the same Danes people who would raid England).

Of course, Keepers may also look to have scenarios set in a single location (such as a Dark Ages equivalent of Arkham or the Severn Valley), although even here the characters will need some motivation to explore the Mythos threats.

CHANGES TO CHARACTER CREATION

All the standard Basic Roleplaying (BRP) statistics should be maintained. Cthulhu Dark Ages recommends that you allocate points to these stats, and this is the best way of creating a competent character.

KNOW ROLLS

Know Rolls are based on Education. As an optional rule it is suggested that:

- *All Know stats are halved. This represents that lack of general knowledge (which is discovered through travel, expertise and communication) of the time*
- *In situations where knowledge about a subject would fall within a character specific training or experience (i.e. a farmer in regards to the land, or a monk or priest on religious ceremony, etc.), the full Know roll can still be used.*

OCCUPATION SKILL POINTS

In most BRP games, characters receive points to allocate to their occupation based skills on their Education. However, many Dark Ages characters have no formal education, and many skills rely more on strength, dexterity and constitution to master, than they do knowledge. To reflect this, the attribute associated to occupational skill points should depend on the occupation itself. The following list is recommended.

- **Appearance** - Beggar, Cleric, Household Officer, Shopkeeper, Juggler/Minstrel, Merchant, Reeve, Small Trader
- **Constitution** - Free Farmer (Geber), Guard, Mercenary/Brigand, Sailor, Woodsman/Fisherman
- **Education** - Cleric, Healer, Monk/Nun, Pilgrim, Priest, Scholar.

RESTRICTIONS ON SKILLS

During this period of world history, education was a privilege rather than a right, and most people received no knowledge of reading or writing at all (although England was seen generally to have a better educated population than many states in Europe). To reflect this, it is suggested that the skills listed under the Thought category are restricted during character creation. This can be done by:

- *doubling the cost of these skills (i.e. two points spent giving only one point of skill) when Personal Interest points (those derived from Intelligence) are used to purchase them*

This rule will allow trained characters to learn these skills much better than those who don't have access to them through their career, and yet does not restrict too heavily players having more martial characters with educational skills.

LANGUAGES

Like all regions of the world, England had many different languages. Most important at this time is *Anglo Saxon*, which today is more commonly known as Old English. With both a verbal and written

form, it grew from the Germanic languages that had arrived on Britain over the previous 500 years. Other important languages at the time are:

- **Latin** – The language of the church. Latin was generally limited to those educated by the church and by this time was mainly restricted to ceremony and prayer.
- **Norse** (Old Norse) – The language of the Norse people. Although the various Scandinavian countries all have their own specific dialects, the basics of this language are the same across all. By 1000 AD, Anglo Saxon and Old Norse have many elements in common (making conversation between the two fairly easy).
- **Welsh** (Old Welsh) – The language of Wales. Growing from older northern England and Cornish Celtic dialects, by 1000AD Welsh is its own distinct language.
- **Celtic** (Old Gaelic/Old Irish) – The language of Scotland and Ireland. Originating in Ireland, it had taken root in Scotland around the 6th or 7th centuries and is widely used in the northern land by the time Alfred the Great united England.

DARK AGES COMBAT

The following rules are offered to help reflect the rough and tumble of Dark Ages combat, and should be used in conjunction with the existing rules presented in the *Cthulhu Dark Ages* rule book. As always individual Keepers and their players are free to use or ignore these options as they see fit.

PARRYING

Melee combat is more often than not, a vicious fight for survival, where any and everything goes. Additionally, trained and experienced warriors have a much higher chance of surviving combat than those thrust into battle with little knowledge. As such, rather than limiting characters to one parry a turn, the following rules are suggested:

- *Each attack can only have one parry attempt made against it.*
- *The first parry a character attempts each round is completed with no penalty.*
- *Each additional parry in the round (i.e. until the character acts again) is attempted with a cumulative -30% (i.e. first parry is at the defenders weapon skill, second at weapon skill - 30%, third at weapon skill -60%, etc.).*

BLOCKING MISSILE ATTACKS

Missile weapons can not be dodged, but can be blocked with a shield. In most cases, attempting to stop such an attack is a matter of hold and hope.

- *All shields have a base chance equal to their hit points to block a missile attack.*
- *Characters using a shield wall, can add the base chance of the shield beside them to their block (i.e. a character with defenders on both sides would add both of these to their chance to block the attack, while the characters on the end would only add use the bonus from the defender - be it on their left or right - they form the shield wall with).*

ARMOUR AND BLUNT TRAUMA

By the 10th and 11th century armour is extremely effective. Few weapons are able to pierce chain armour and even hardened leather is enough to turn most blades. Despite this protection, the constant collisions between weapons and body still takes its toll on the warrior, and few leave a battle without bruising and more serious internal wounds. To reflect this:

- *All attacks that hit do a minimum of 1 damage, even if the armour would have otherwise absorbed all of the damage from the attack.*

IMPALING ATTACKS

When a critical hit (1/5th of the attacker's skill) is rolled, it represents an attack aimed at a vital or weak spot on an opponent. While these can be blocked as normal, the results of a successful strike can be devastating. When such a critical attack isn't parried or dodged the following effects may be used instead of rolling for damage twice:

- *When an impaling weapon rolls a critical, the attacker may choose to bypass all armour, instead of rolling for damage twice. This represents the arrow or blade slipping past the defender's armour.*
- *When a blunt weapon rolls a critical, the attacker may choose to make a knock-out, instead of rolling for damage twice. This represents the massive trauma from a strike to the head or torso.*
- *In all cases, a character's damage bonus is only applied once to any damage roll.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

While I can't say this is an exhaustive list, the following were vital getting an understanding of the period of England's history.

WEBSITES

- Regia Anglorum (<http://www.regia.org/>) - For a general overview Anglo-Saxon, Viking, Norman and British life.
- Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>) - Simple and concise articles introducing this period.

PODCASTS

- The British History Podcast (<http://thebritishhistorypodcast.com/>) - Excellent in all ways, the Dark Ages shows start at Episode 47. Recommended listening for anyone wanting to know more about life in the England at this time.

BOOKS

- The Fall of Saxon England (1975) by Richard Humble - Extremely readable book on the rise and fall of Anglo Saxon England.
- In Search of the Dark Ages (1987) by Michael Wood - A look at various periods in British history, and a supplement to the 1980s documentary series of the same name.
- Dark Ages Britain (1984) by Robert Jackson - Detailed look at various sites and locations still existing from this period.

CLEAR CREDIT

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