

Using the Dark Ages as a Fictional Setting - Part 1



I was recently reading some novels set in the Dark Ages in Saxon Britain (more about those below). This era just predates the more popular Middle Ages and is relatively overlooked in fantasy world building, although it has an established niche in historical fiction.

Many worldbuilders do not know much about what life was like then, or why this might be an interesting era to base a fictional setting on. I think it can present unique challenges and opportunities to you as worldbuilder, even if you don't care to create a strict analog of Anglo-Saxon England. This post will outline some things I find interesting about the Dark Ages because they lend themselves especially well to use in a fictional setting. Hopefully this will give worldbuilders some good ideas, and may also broaden gamers' perspectives on what a Dark Ages world has to offer.

Historically, the era in question here runs roughly from the 5th century to sometime in the 11th century, and corresponds to what is also called the Early Middle Ages in our Earth timeline.[1] The Dark Ages stretched over Europe, but I'm thinking mostly about Anglo-Saxon England in the following discussion, since that is what I am most familiar with.

"Surviving Culture" Motif

There was a pattern of collapse and reorganization of society during the Dark Ages that happened because of the fall of the Roman Empire. If your setting is an Earth analog, events from our time line might apply. If you have a completely unique world, what is important is this formula:

An empire spanning a large territory, that imposed cultural, economic, legal and military values on its possessions, now fades from the local area. This leaves disorganization and a power vacuum in its wake. Over time, something new emerges from this chaos.

If this disorganization includes a loss in the cultural or economic level that was once the standard, then what follows are your Dark Ages, whatever world you let this drama play out in.

When "the world as you know it" vanishes and you (or your society) suffer significant loss as a result--well, then, I'd call that a version of a post-apocalyptic setting (though without nuclear bombs or mutants, of course). The "collapse of civilization," whenever it happens, is fraught with danger as well as opportunity, and the "darkness" that follows is a time of change. Even if that change is gradual and creeping over decades (as it was in Britain, where Roman administration received less funding, fewer troops, and eventually was slowly withdrawn), it is still a change that upsets how the world worked up to that point in time.

Upheaval like this always leaves something new in its wake. If your setting's time frame is close to the "loss of empire" event, or especially close to traumas that accelerate the collapse (war; disease; famine), then you are creating a particularly, um, "exciting" environment for your characters to adventure in. The more sudden the contraction of empire, the more chaotic the changes will be. (Maybe this is exciting more in the sense of the Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times.")

In our timeline, social and economic disorganization eventually got sorted as people reasserted control over their own lives and their own ways of being evolved over time. In the wake of empire, those "ways of being" were colored by the values of the vanished empire that took root in native soil.

The following examples come from our own history, but the principles can apply to any fictional world.

What Was "Dark" About the Dark Ages

We call the Dark Ages "dark" because, as the Renaissance poet Petrarch put it, "the light of learning" had gone out of the world. After the fall of Rome, the people who could still read and write were a handful of aristocrats and monks in monasteries. Literacy and learning became an uncommon and highly valued thing. Vast areas of learning and knowledge were lost; what remained was contained in books hidden away and forgotten in monasteries.

In the case of monks, their literacy helped create the foundation for their subsequent rise as a power elite. In the Middle Ages clergy came to be considered one of the "estates" ordained by God. (See [this post](#) for more on the estates.)

Long distance trade networks largely collapsed. People became more dependent on what they could produce locally. Distant markets and (for a long time) luxury goods stayed unreachable for the average consumer. Coinage fell out of use and there was a general return to barter basis trade until the economy grew stronger and cash money was again necessary to facilitate commerce.

Without Roman legions to keep peace, the responsibility for dealing with bandits and crime fell

upon local lords. Local warriors came into their own and warbands gathered to enforce a lord's will. Without a supreme legal authority, people resorted more to force to back up claims and exert their own authority. There was a lot of jockeying for position and active rivalries for power. In some places you couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting a "king." During this time the title of "king" usually meant, "he rules this tribe or clan." Rarely did it mean "he rules a large consolidated territory." Never did it mean, "he rules a nation" in the sense that we mean that today. "Kings" in the "large territory" sense emerged only later, after a long period of maneuvering for power and consolidation of alliances.

It was during this period that feudalism arose in Europe. Society transitioned from being centered around tribes, with loyalty to the clan, to being centered around a feudal authority, and settlements that had allegiance--not necessarily bloodlines--in common.

External threats lurked on the borders and made regular incursions into once-imperial territories. Rome dealt with Huns to the east, the Muslim empire to the south, and Germanic tribes to the north. In England, Vikings alternately harrowed the land and settled in conquered territories from 793 until they were fought off for good by King Harold Godwinson at the fateful [battle of Stamford Bridge](#) in 1066.[2] (For more info on this and his later, even more famous Battle of Hastings, see the video embedded at the end of this post.)

Related to this external threat was the internal upheaval caused by migrations of various peoples from one land to another. The Huns invading from the east displaced large numbers of Germanic tribes, who headed west. As a result, the Angles (from the regional name "Angeln"), the Saxons (der Sachse/die Sächsin) and the Jutes (from Jutland) [came to Britain from Germany](#) in the 5th century. They displaced or assimilated the Britons who lived there before them and became a dominant force in the emerging English culture. The word "England" itself is a bastardization of "Angel-land": the land of the Angles.



Famine took a bigger toll on life during the Dark Ages than under imperial rule, for it was more difficult to acquire food supplies from areas with a surplus. With the loss of medical

knowledge, disease was more devastating and mortality rates went up. As chance would have it, in our timeline [the Plague of Justinian](#) swept Europe several times even before the more well known Black Death struck in the High Middle Ages. The plague came to Britain in 544. There and across the continent it took a huge toll on life, resulting in 40 to 50% fatality rates.

Massive depopulation by pandemics caused tectonic shifts in the labor supply, land ownership, wages paid, and other economic factors, quite aside from the social shock of such unstoppable and frightening loss of human life.

But not all was destruction and upheaval throughout this period. There was a lot of silver lining in those clouds, and later the sun came out entirely as people figured out how they were going to live without Romans in charge.

I'll write about that and what this all implies for your own Dark Ages setting in the second part of this post.

[Click here for Part 2.](#)

Recommended Reading: [The Last Kingdom by Bernard Cornwall](#) (book 1 of a series about Saxon King Alfred the Great); [I am the Chosen King by Helen Hollick](#), about King Harold's showdown to keep the throne of England--a very Saxon take on the conquest of 1066.

1. The Dark Ages has been defined in different ways at different times. [Read about it here.](#) I'm calling the period before the Norman conquest of England the Dark Ages, and what came after is the Middle Ages. (Although the Dark Ages are analogous to the Early Middle Ages, if we are being technical about our eras.)

2. King Harold, a spectacular victor at Stamford, was roundly defeated by William the Conqueror shortly thereafter--arguably because his army was exhausted from marching rapidly north to fight Vikings, then racing back south again to face the Normans.

The BBC history video below ([Battlefield Britain: the Battle of Hastings](#)) gives a great treatment of that turning point in England's history and King Harold's challenges in fighting two enemy armies back to back. Many scholars mark the end of the Dark Ages as coinciding with William's successful seizing of the English throne.