

Using the Dark Ages as a Fictional Setting - Part 2

[In Part 1 of this series](#), I outlined some of the factors that mark an era as being a Dark Age. In this final installment, Part 2, I look at things that go beyond the doom and gloom of "oh no, civilization has collapsed!"

Not So Dark: the March of Progress

While things were falling apart in one regard, from another perspective big changes happened over time, and many of them were for the better.

Inventions in this time period had a far larger impact on economies and how people lived than we might expect to find in those simpler times. Use of the [heavy wheeled moldboard plow](#) allowed farmers to work more land and produce more food in the 6th century, resulting in a notable population increase by the 7th century. Roman [watermill](#) technology persisted past the fall of empire, enabling people to use this device for labor-intensive tasks like grinding grain, sawing lumber, or crushing rock. By the time William the Conqueror ordered the Domesday Book survey of taxable properties in 1086, there were 6500 mills in England, contributing to a growing proto-industrial economy.



Politically and militarily, for a long time this era allowed able individuals to create their own fortunes in the world. From the influx of Germanic tribes that displaced Britons, to the constant jockeying for power in an evolving landscape, hierarchies were not as entrenched as they would be in the later Middle Ages. Even women had a broader role in business and property ownership than in later centuries when their role would be hemmed in by laws that limited what they could do.

Early on it could hardly be said that feudal systems existed at all. Tribal and clan systems were

dependent on blood ties and family loyalty, and these connections dominated personal and political interactions for a large part of this era. A feudal system (based on authority bestowed from someone higher up the chain) was not the standard it would become in the later Middle Ages, though it had its beginnings here and became more developed as centuries passed.

The Britons (a Celtic folk) who had been ruled by Romans both fought between themselves for power and position, and fought against the slowly encroaching Anglo-Saxons. This period of strife lasted for roughly two centuries after Rome left. In service to these martial needs, they rebuilt long-deserted Iron Age hill forts, occupied deserted Roman fortifications, and in some cases built new defenses.

But this was a period of hill forts, wooden palisades, and earthworks--not unlike those used in colonial or western America in a later time--not of castles as we think of them in the Middle Ages. [Motte-and-bailey construction](#) would come later, with the advent of the Normans, and large-scale stone stronghold and castle construction would follow in the Middle Ages. During this Dark Ages period, the emphasis was mainly on defenses that could be built quickly with local resources and unskilled labor, and easily maintained. Progress here was measured in terms of fighting forces raised, forts manned, and territory claimed and held safe from foes.

Not least of the huge changes of this period were the shifts in religion. The Dark Ages saw the transition from paganism to Christianity. I'm not classifying that as a good or a bad event; I mention it to point out that that transition sparked a plethora of cultural changes that shaped life for centuries to come. That, in turn, laid the foundation for much of the world as we know it today.

That kind of progression is not relevant if your story stays centered in the Dark Ages, but the march of cultural change over time is something to consider in broad strokes as you plan where things will head in your world.

What Matters to Your World Design

The factors mentioned above suggest several areas of change and challenge in a Dark Ages setting. The list is much longer than that, of course. [Here is a good link for a general overview](#) of the era and the issues in play if you want to dig more deeply into the Dark Ages.

Some elements of particular world-building interest come to mind as well:

Pick Your Social Status Dynamics. Depending on how far developed your Dark Ages period is, this milieu allows you to feature tribes, chieftains and warlords, or to move right into a feudal "noblemen-aristocrats-peasants" model that blends seamlessly into the Middle Ages proper.

What Threats Are Lurking? If you are creating a unique setting, consider what external forces might have contributed to the decline and fall of the now-lost empire. Are those forces still in play, and might they have an impact on the local setting as well? Just like the Huns threatening Europe, and the Vikings that raided England's shores, those "barbarians" may well threaten "the

local folk" without an empire to hold them back.

(Re)shape Religion.



Not all settings will have one religion displaced by another, but if your empire's belief system is different from the locals, there will indeed be some level of fermentation going on. Even if the empire believes in a "live and let live" approach, the local setting becomes exposed to the empire's different form of worship and beliefs. What effect does this have on local attitudes and beliefs? If the religion that came in on foreign feet is more aggressive in their proselytization, or if they have the weight of government and law behind them, changes can be imposed and they can be far-reaching. And this is before the outside power (the empire) even goes away. What happens when they are gone? In the state-of-change that is a Dark Age, all kinds of things can alter, and religious differences can easily flare into conflict.

If you are following the Earth historical pattern, you know how things go, but if you are working on a unique settings, this is one factor that warrants special consideration. What is happening in the area of religion in your setting? Religion is a powerful force in societies-- even more so if you have magic in your setting and it is divine in origin.

Laws and Governance. What happens when the legal systems collapse and go away? Empires impose their own justice and governance systems, and a vacuum can be left when they are gone.

On the one hand, people *might* go on their merry way and continue to follow the systems they have now become accustomed to. That's what happened in Britain: although top layers of imperial administration were missing, each "county"-level governance unit continued to function just as the Romans had set them up. The governance system worked on that local scale and people stuck with it because it kept things moving along.

That's not always the case, though. If your locals resent the imposition of foreign power, they may well want to return to "the ways of old," or adopt new ways of managing themselves. But how, then, will they make that change? It is unlikely they can completely abandon what the now-absent empire has put in place, because now they have years of contracts and agreements and judicial findings and so on all couched in the imperial framework that is no longer in force. What to do, what to do? Who really owns that property over there? If we can't settle things by talking, there are always swords... What solution will your people take to this dilemma?

These and other sharp points of transition are worth giving special attention to. They define how your people live, and can fuel character and plot dilemmas that you can use to dramatic effect in story or game.

Myth and Legend

A final thought in parting. Our Dark Ages are historical for us. This is the era that gave us [Brian Boru](#), a real man who became a near-legendary king and warrior in Ireland, and (possibly) mythical [King Arthur](#) from the earlier years of the Dark Ages.

If your version of these Early Middle Ages allows for the fantastic, this is a time and place where you can neatly insert figures of legend, either from our own timeline or of your own invention. In doing so, it's important to be true to the era, so you don't break the audience's suspension of disbelief in what you are constructing. King Arthur, for instance, is not a "a knight in shining armor" if you have him appear in the Dark Ages. Plate mail was not invented yet! Instead, he would be (and, many argue, actually was) a Dark Ages lord who probably went to battle armored in chain mail, or some combination of chain and leather. In the alternative, he might have fought in the battle gear of the recently-departed Empire. He would have been supported by his kinsmen and loyal warriors who fought because of strong clan connections or personal loyalty to their leader. He would have been very much a man of his times.

Taken in his more native form, he fits very well into the exact historical context of the Dark Ages.[1] In a fantasy Dark Ages he can be treated as an ordinary (albeit heroic) human to be encountered, or he can be as fantastic as you wish him to be. If you want to take only a high fantasy approach, insert the Arthur of towering legend into your setting, instead of Arthur the bold local nobleman. Legendary Arthur is quite fantastic, complete with magical swords, [ladies who live underwater](#), and of course his loyal wizard companion Merlin.

While Arthurian adventures in particular are a mainstay of English-speaking, western medieval fantasy, the bigger question is, what heroic or fantastic figures will fit well into your setting? Who should be at the nexus of magic and history and heroic deeds (if it must be someone larger than life)? Is this someone who shapes the events in your setting, who your characters may encounter, or will they only hear tales told about this legendary hero? Or perhaps your characters themselves will become the figures out of legend who loom large in your Dark Ages landscape.

Besides famous people, this is an era also associated with things like faery encounters, forgotten gods, magical standing stones, and much more. It is difficult to say exactly what accounts and beliefs stem from the Dark Ages, since written records for this period are sparse, but many tales told in the Middle Ages are believed to have their roots in the preceding centuries, or even in Iron Age lore that came before. If you want to interject magical creatures, encounters, and other fantastic elements, this can be a forgiving era to use in fantasy of that sort. It is closer in time to a tribal, nature-worshipping folk who believed in magic and the supernatural as an ordinary part of life. You can weave this sensibility into your setting if you put some careful thought into it.

As long as you keep in mind the essential conditions and attributes of this Dark Ages period, it will retain that flavor even after you've added a dose of myth, legend, and magical ingredients. If you're more of an historical purist, then the legendary names will remain just that: mythical figures to tell stories about around the evening fire. Whichever style of Dark Ages you prefer, the key is to understand the forces that shape this time and place, and how your people are living there.



Related Post: [Using the Dark Ages as a Fictional Setting--Part 1](#)

Video embedded below: *The Dark Ages*

1. In modern times we are very used to thinking of King Arthur as a plate-armored knight who jousts with a lance and lives in a huge stone castle. These are all the inventions of the High or Late Middle Ages (after 1066). Sure, you can frame Arthur like that if you want, but my focus here is on what fits well into a Dark Ages setting. So I'm advocating a more realistic Arthur who could have lived during this period. (I and many scholars of the era think he was a real person, but that is a lengthy debate for another time. [See this link for more on the debate about Arthur's existence.](#))