

CTHULHU DARK AGES

“Quod in aeternum cubet mortuum non est,
Et saeculis miris actis etiam Mors perierit”

Horror Role-playing in the Dark Ages

by

Stéphane Gesbert

Email s.gesbert@cthulhudarkages.cjb.net

www <http://cthulhudarkages.cjb.net/>

Introduction

“And I saw a beast rise out of the sea; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.” - Revelation 13:1

950 AD. The Occident is torn apart: empires and kingdoms have endured two centuries of invasions, and now warlords fight over the remains like wild dogs. The clergy is weak and morally depraved, cities are depopulated, trade is stagnant and violence reigns everywhere. History is coming into the Sixth Age of mankind, the ultimate age before the end of the world.

950 AD. The Byzantine Theodorus Philetas translates the Al Azif into Greek, and renames it Necronomicon. It will take one century before the blasphemous tome is finally condemned, and most copies destroyed...

Cthulhu Dark Ages continues with Lovecraft's sinister tradition of men and women struggling against the dark forces of the Cthulhu Mythos. However, Cthulhu Dark Ages explores a “Dark Ages” era not yet spanned by Lovecraftian tales: 950-1050 AD, nearly thousand years before the period generally considered in Call of Cthulhu.

In this troubled era, in these hundred years when manuscript copies of the *Necronomicon* circulated from hand to hand, mankind almost yielded to the uncaring forces of the Mythos: the dark young of Shub-Niggurath infested boundless forests. Mi-go guarded mountain tops, ghouls and miri-nigri haunted burial grounds, and deep ones infiltrated coastal settlements. Nyarlathotep wandered about the earth in his thousand disguises. Great Cthulhu slumbered in the abyss, dreaming of the Seventh Age, when he would be unchained to rise out of the sea and walk the earth again. The last magi tried powers that were not meant for humans, and were lured into the Otherworld - abode of Yog-Sothoth...

What This Supplement Covers

Cthulhu Dark Ages is fully compatible with the philosophy and the game system of Call of Cthulhu. Owing to particularities of the Dark Ages, some adjustments and additions to the *game system* have been made. They are described in the following pages.

Cthulhu Dark Ages introduces the *Old Grimoire* of spells, which combines traditional elements of witchcraft and rituals from ancient religions. Cthulhu Dark Ages also develops the notions of Otherworld (the interstices between spheres of existence) and spirits (Ghosts, Old Ones) that transpire in the Cthulhu rulebook and in Lovecraft's work. A selection of new Mythos creatures, deities and beasts is given in the Dark Ages *Bestiary*.

Several *scenarios* near the end of this book introduce Cthulhu Dark Ages' grim world to players and keepers. In these tales adventurers will face new unearthly enemies, and may discover scriptures more ancient and more terrible than the *Necronomicon* itself...

Finally, the “*utilities*” appendix is a complete guide to the 950-1050 AD era.

Cthulhu Dark Ages welcomes Call of Cthulhu players and keepers into a world of harsh existence and ancient horrors.

Role-Playing in the Dark Ages

Cthulhu Dark Ages is historically set and presents keeper and players with a contradictory world of absolute oppression and wild impunity. In the Dark Ages almost everybody had a lord to serve, and social status largely predetermined one's fate. On the other hand, the world was rapidly changing, and the changes bred more freedom than earlier or later in the middle-ages: ambitious brigands sometimes settled down as frontier warlords, and a farmer boy called Gerbert eventually became pope!

In Cthulhu Dark Ages, the players take the part of adventurers, and attempt to solve some mystery or resolve some situation. As in other eras, the ability to read Latin or to use a library is often worth far more than high skill with a weapon. Indeed, swords or arrows do not harm the most powerful creatures. Besides, Dark Ages societies had drastic ways of dealing with people who attracted too much attention, or presented any form of threat to established customs and authority.

In the Dark Ages, social status - as represented in the game by the Status skill - was supposed to reflect a person's intrinsic valor, as well as personal reputation and monetary worth. In the absence of personal archives, sheer status was often accepted as a guarantee of trustworthiness. Dark Ages people would spare no effort to discover the real status and the wealth of a stranger.

Like “Credit Rating” in the 20s, Status may ebb and flow because of a scandal or a heroic action. In special situations, the keeper may call for a Status roll instead of Fast Talk, Persuade or even Bargain.

First Encounters

A repeated challenge facing the keeper at the beginning of play is why the adventurers come together. The adventurers inevitably have different backgrounds and occupations. Combinations of adventurers with very different status may be difficult to justify and maintain in a strictly medieval setting. Such interesting mixtures may very well arise in odd circumstances though, and produce exciting role-play.

Here follow a few suggestions for first meetings (the last two in particular may bring together adventurers of very different origins):

- ❑ All adventurers answer an employment offer by their mutual lord, to perform some deed important to his or her cause.
- ❑ All adventurers have a mutual friend, who asks them for a favor.

- ❑ All adventurers are confronted with the same mystery. It may be a series of unexplained events, an obscure prophecy, or some vile intrigue.
- ❑ All adventurers are present at some incident. Their common destiny is sealed when all become involved.

Here are examples of compatible occupations (see Game System for more details on occupations):

- ❑ All players pertain to a noble familia or are related to it. Nobles are more or less free to do what they please, have resources, etc., good conditions for investigative role-playing. Occupations: Warrior, Guard, Household Officer, Sergeant, etc.
- ❑ All players are men of Church or are related to a clerical institution or a religious order. Such “adventurers” must observe the laws of the Church, are generally well instructed and only rarely bound to servile work, and they are (presumably) devoted to the eradication of evil. Ideal occupations for investigating the horrors of the Mythos. Occupations: Scholar, Priest, Monk/Nun, Cleric, Mayor, etc.
- ❑ All players are from the same community or are related to it. This could be a farmers’ village, a fishermen’s village, or a craftsmen’s or a merchants’ guild. Restrictions: such communities are often bound to a particular locality. Occupations: Farmer, Woodsman/Fisherman, Craftsman/Shopkeeper, Merchant, Small Trader, Sailor, etc.
- ❑ All players are “misfits” or outcasts of society. Restrictions: most of these people have to operate on the fringes of society, and possibly lack resources or status. Occupations: Beggar, Healer, Hermit/Heretic, Juggler/Minstrel, Pilgrim, Mercenary/Brigand, etc.

Don’t take the above classification at face value. For instance, adventurers from a village community may be people with very different backgrounds: a sergeant, a priest, free and unfree farmers (including craftsmen and women, the local militia), a trader, a healer, and so forth. Remember that the purpose of horror role-playing is to have a good time. Rules and historical settings are just vehicles of play. Whether you stick to them or ignore them is secondary to having fun...

References

Here are the main sources for Cthulhu Dark Ages. Many little details were gathered from a large number of secondary references, much too long to be listed here. The Keeper is invited to read some of the Lovecraftian fiction to get context for his or her Cthulhu Dark Ages adventures.

Call of Cthulhu Fiction

Dagon and Other Macabre Tales, H.P. Lovecraft, Arkham House (1987) – *From Beyond, The Hound, The Horror at Red Hook*.

Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos, H.P. Lovecraft, Arkham House (1990) – *The Black Stone, The Hounds of Tindalos, Rising with Surtsey*.

Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos, ed. R.M. Price, Fedogan & Bremer (1992) – *The Lord of Illusion, Lair of the Star Spawn*.

The New Lovecraft Circle, ed. R. M. Price, Fedogan & Bremer (1996) – *The Kiss of Bugg-Shash*.

Cold Print, R. Campbell, TOR (1987) – *The Church in High Street, The Moons Lens*.

Miscellaneous Writings, H.P. Lovecraft, Arkham House (1995) – *Nyarlathotep, The Very Old Folk*.

Dreams of Terror and Death, H.P. Lovecraft, Ballantine (1995) – *Nyarlathotep, From Beyond, The Hound, Through the Gates of the Silver Key*.

The Dunwich Cycle, ed. R.M. Price, Chaosium (1996) – *The Dunwich Horror, The Round Tower*.

The Necronomicon, ed. R.M. Price, Chaosium (1996) – *The Shadow from the Stars, The Book of Gates*.

The Encyclopedia Cthulhiana, D. Harms, Chaosium (1998).

Nameless Cults, R.E. Howard, Chaosium (2001) – *The Black Stone, People of the Dark, The Worms of the Earth, The Shadow Kingdom*.

General References

Sacred origins of profound things, C. Panati, Penguin (1996).

Encyclopaedia Britannica, CD 2.02 (1995).

The Holy Bible, new revised standard version, Oxford (1989).

The book of Enoch, trans. by R. H. Charles, SPCK (1977).

Alchemy, the philosopher’s stone, A. Coudert, Wilwood House (1980).

Chaosium’s Call of Cthulhu, *The Keeper’s Companion, The Creature Companion, The Complete Dreamlands, Gaslight, and Elric!*

Game System

Poisonous plants & animals, H. Altmann, Chatto & Windus (1980).

Man and the sea, P. Banbury, Adlard Coles (1975).

Bestiary

Dictionary of mythology, F. Comte, Wordsworth Reference (1994).

Gods and myths of Northern Europe, H. R. Ellis Davidson, Penguin (1990).

Les nains et les elfes au moyen age, C. Lecouteux, Imago (1988).

Je découvre les animaux sauvages, S. Thomassin and J.J. Marquart, André Leson (1978).

The Dark Ages

La France de l’an mil, R. Delort, Seuil (1990).

Le Haut Moyen Age, J. Dhont, revised and updated by M. Rouche (1976), Bordas.

A history of the Middle Ages, S. Painter, Macmillan Press (1953).

La vie quotidienne en l’an mille, E. Pognon, Hachette (1981).

The castle story, S. Sancha, Collins (1991).