



M · Y · T · H · I · C  
BRITAIN

Mythras

Lawrence Whitaker  
& Friends



# Mythras

## Roleplaying in

# Dark Ages Britain

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the players and characters of the *Mythic Britain* playtests, conducted between 2011 and 2014 at the annual PeteCon summit held in Boden, northern Sweden, and at the fortnightly Toronto roleplaying sessions. The players are listed above. Their characters are:

*Sweden: Ceinwyn, Culwch, Curwan, Dagrún, Efford, Eowald, Forni, Galahad, Glanwyr, Isca, Lanval, Nimue and Tristan*

*Toronto: Aed, Aild, Ayn, Cunnan, Cynan and Gwynneth*

Mythic Britain is also dedicated to Bernard Cornwell, whose "Warlord Chronicles" were a huge inspiration and influence, and to Greg Stafford, who first trod the Mythic Island of Britain with "King Arthur Pendragon".

Without these friends, players, characters, writers and creators, this book would not exist.





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# INTRODUCTION

**T**his book concerns the British Isles during one of its most elusive and enigmatic periods: the so-called Dark Ages. It examines the culture and society of the post-Romanic era, speculating on life in the 5th and early 6th Centuries. It looks at the myths, beliefs, and magic of the Celts; it offers some views on legendary figures such as Vortigern, Uther, Arthur, and Merlin. Its intent is to provide a solid, gritty background for MYTHRAS adventures and campaigns, taking its cues from history, myth, and a few fictional sources such as Bernard Cornwell's Arthurian trilogy *The Warlord Chronicles*.

However, this is not necessarily an Arthurian book, although Arthur certainly figures in Mythic Britain, because he is intrinsically associated with the Dark Ages period. Rather, Mythic Britain is an exploration of the Dark Ages with as much focus on more general themes, including the Saxon invasion, as on the romance of the Arthurian story.

The book is divided into two distinct parts. The first part describes Britain and presents the games mechanics appropriate to the Mythic Britain era. The second part is a campaign consisting of seven scenarios that draw extensively on the previous chapters. The book's structure is as follows:

## HISTORY

Britain's history up to, and including, the early 6th Century CE. This chapter forms the basis for the information in this book and the campaign scenarios.

## KINGDOMS

A description of Mythic Britain's kingdoms, ranging from the Pictish lands of the north, down to the lands of the south. The chapter also provides an overview of Logres - the Saxon lands.





### CELTIC LIFE AND SOCIETY

The culture, daily lives, social conventions, and other background information essential to understanding the Celts of Mythic Britain and roleplaying a Celtic character.

### MYTHIC BRITAIN CHARACTERS

Full rules for creating Celt and Saxon characters, including new and modified cultural backgrounds, professions, skills, Passions, and so on.

### GODS, RELIGION AND MAGIC

Pagan and Christian beliefs and religions are examined, explained, and presented for play. This chapter supplies more detail on the druids and the Gods of Britain, along with rules for early Christian beliefs and worship. The nature and extent of magic is described here — how it works (or does not, according to belief), along with rules for using the different magic systems of MYTHRAS in a Dark Age world.

### BRITAIN AT WAR

Rules concerning combat and battle in Dark Ages Britain. Armour, weapons, and equipment; Combat Styles; warbands; and strategy and tactics.

### MYTHIC BRITONS

Descriptions and statistics for a wide range of Dark Age personalities, including Arthur, Merlin, Vortigern, and others.

### THE MYTHIC BRITAIN CAMPAIGN

A set of scenarios forming a campaign arc, beginning in the year 495.

## RULES FOR MYTHIC BRITAIN

This is not a standalone game. Games Masters and players will need access to the MYTHRAS rules, but this is the only essential resource.

For an enhanced experience, we strongly advise some additional reading. The Bibliography on [page 360](#) provides a list of books useful for learning more about this period and its myths. Reading some of the fiction and non-fiction suggested here will give players and Games Masters a great deal of inspiration and a real feeling for the period and its people.

Aside from the MYTHRAS rules and perhaps some additional reading, you need only this book, your imagination (and the imaginations of some friends), some dice, and a desire to travel back in time 1,500 years



### HISTORICAL ACCURACY



This book takes substantial liberties with Britain's history of the immediate post-Romanic period. Historical accounts of the time began a century after the period Mythic Britain covers, and continued for several centuries afterwards. They are incomplete, contradictory, and probably exercised their own liberties with historical truth. Indeed, even contemporary scholarly resources differ in their views and interpretation of Celtic society in the first half of the first millennium.

The simple facts are that little is known of the period, sources are unreliable in many places, and so what actually happened will never be known. The fun of a book such as this is that one can speculate and extrapolate. We have done just that. History provides the cues for imagination, and Mythic Britain mixes historical fact (where it is reliable enough), the wealth of Celtic and Saxon myth, and the MYTHRAS rules to create a believable setting for fantasy campaigns. So this book should be viewed as a work of fiction inspired by a mixture of history, historical fiction, necessary speculation and extrapolation, and even some deliberate twisting of the facts.





# HISTORY

# AND



# OVERVIEW

**B**ritain and Ireland form Mythic Britain. These lands are the body of the Great Red Dragon who lives between the Mortal World and the World of the Gods. From its dreams is born the Spirit World, and within the Spirit World, but distinct from it, is the Other World, which is where mortals go upon death, to remain forever blessed and forever young.

Mortals cannot see the Great Red Dragon, but they can feel its presence in the wind, in the sun, and in the strength of the earth. The spirits, born of its dreams, are invisible but all around us, and can be seen by the druids, who are blessed by the Gods and the Dragon with such keen sight.

The Gods, who made All Things, are remote from mortals, but aware of them and needful of their belief. They live in their own land, also made of the body of the Dragon, and tell their own stories and do their own deeds, continually, living, dying, and being reborn. These actions perpetuate the cycle of Creation.

Side by side with the Great Red Dragon stands the Great White Dragon. It, too, forms the islands of Britain, but it is a baleful force

that favours enemies and invaders. Normally it sleeps and the Great Red Dragon is all-powerful. But things have been changed with the coming of the Romans and the massacre of the druids. The Great White Dragon has awoken and the Great Red Dragon sleeps. Invader gods and invader peoples assail Britain. First, the Romans with their gods, then the Saxons with theirs, and now the One God of the Eastern Lands and his worshippers who call themselves Christians.

The Old Ways are dying. The Red Dragon is besieged. The Old Gods grow more distant; and the local spirits, overrun by spirits created by the White Dragon, have become evil and scheming.

If Britons do not challenge, if Britons do not fight, then the Red Dragon will die and all shall die with it, leaving a land welcoming of enemies and shadows, false gods, and evil ways. Celts shall become corpses and slaves. Parents shall mourn their children's souls, and the Bridges of Swords and Sighs will be sundered.

*Now is the time to fight. For Britain! For the Red Dragon!*





## BRITAIN AND MAGIC

Britain was once a land rich in magic. In the Time of Heroes, long before anywhere else existed, everyone could work magic through cooperation with the spirits. When the Time of Heroes came to an end, and the Great Red Dragon separated the Spirit and Mortal Worlds, the druids were chosen as the sole custodians of the knowledge of magic and became its only practitioners. A druid is one who has etched on their bones the runes, carved there by the Great Red Dragon. Only with the runes so etched can magic be worked.

The druids were strong for uncounted years. Then the Romans came, in the reign of the Emperor Claudius, and enslaved Britain. They brought with them their invader gods, stolen from the Greeks, Egyptians, and others: Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Isis, and Mithras. They betrayed the druids and slaughtered them, almost completely, at the Holy Glade on Ynys Mon, above the very eye of the Great Red Dragon. From then on, magic faded in Britain. A few druids escaped the massacre, but they were forced to hide themselves and their powers. The Treasures of Britain, an inheritance from the Time of Heroes, were plundered and lost. Magic became weak, and it is only now that the Romans have gone, and the druids can emerge from their hiding places, that magic can regain its strength.







## FROM THE ANGLIO SAXON CHRONICLE

A.D. 449. This year Marcian and Valentinian assumed the empire and reigned seven winters. In their days Hengest and Horsa, invited by Vortigern, king of the Britons to his assistance, landed in Britain in a place that is called Ipwinesfleet; first of all to support the Britons, but they afterwards fought against them. The king directed them to fight against the Picts; and they did so; and obtained the victory wheresoever they came. They then sent to the Angles, and desired them to send more assistance. They described the worthlessness of the Britons, and the richness of the land. They then sent them greater support.

For those who believe in the Old Gods, magic is real and present. The druids can work simple charms and cantrips, as well as more powerful magic such as channelling the powers of the spirits and shape-shifting (again with spirit help). Non-druidic Britons never dabble in magic: they are not schooled in its ways and to do so is too dangerous. Magic is highly ritualised, secretive, and shrouded in lore. Without the depth of knowledge possessed by the druids, magic is impossible to work.

Those who believe in the Christian God reject magic entirely. Only God and His Son can work miracles, although occasionally they work through Saints to perform isolated acts of wonder. According to them, the magic of the druids is, in fact, the work of Satan; for it is clear in the Holy Scriptures that there is only One God and all other gods are false. Magic, then, is devilry. Spirits are demons who beguile and corrupt; charms and cantrips are direct blasphemies. Those who worship God and receive magic are sinners who must beg forgiveness or risk damnation.

The Saxons have their own gods and their own magic, although it is very similar, in practice and effect, to the magic of the druids. There is thus no practical difference between druidic magic and that of the Saxons.

## KINGS, BETRAYERS

Britain's history involves many important, legendary people. The key figures are Vortigern, Uther, Merlin, Arthur, Mark, and the Saxons Hengest and Horsa and, later, Aelle. It is a combination of ambition, treachery, and divided loyalties, resulting in war and chaos. The druids, and Merlin foremost among them, actually trace the roots of Britain's strife to the Roman conquest, the defeat of Boudicca, and the massacre of the druids at Ynys Mon. These events of the last 50 years

caused the Red Dragon to sleep and for the White Dragon to wake.

So recent history — that which shapes Britain in this mythic time, begins with abandonment.

*Abandonment and Vortigern.*

## THE ROMAN EXODUS AND VORTIGERN'S RISE

Rome abandoned Britain early in the 5th Century, in the reign of the Emperor Valentinian; its people steadily retreating to the heart of the empire and leaving the Celts to their own fate. In the first decades of this century, the Celtic tribes united under a loose confederation with a council headed by an agreed king. First of these kings was Vortigern, a successful warlord of Powys who brought about the unification with blood and iron, but created a culture of alliance that persisted for more than a century. The tribes frequently warred with each other even under this alliance, but the council helped provide settlement for disputes that might otherwise have escalated into all-out war between the tribes. This was Vortigern's success and his legacy. It was also his failure and downfall.

Vortigern was a clever and inspiring leader, but also ambitious and arrogant. Aided by omens and prophecies, he believed he was destined to rule the length of the island, south to north, succeeding where even the Romans had failed, establishing a kingdom beyond the Great Wall built by the Emperor Hadrian. Knowing that even with the tribes united he would never have the strength to conquer the lands of the Picts beyond the Wall, Vortigern sent emissaries to the tribes beyond the Northern Sea to find mercenaries. Many promises were made. Those who came to Vortigern's aid would be granted lands, rights to settle, cattle, and





### MERLIN AND VORTIGERN

At that time, Merlin was a wandering druid, staying in no one place for very long. He was old, even then, and claimed to have witnessed the massacre at Ynys Mon. He came at last to Vortigern's hill fort for the Festival of Beltane and was made welcome in Vortigern's hall. Vortigern told Merlin of his plans to conquer the Picts and unite Britain as one kingdom. He introduced his mercenary allies. Some had said that his plans would fail: Vortigern asked Merlin for his insight.

Merlin reached into the Spirit World. He was quiet for a very long time. When Vortigern pressed for an answer, Merlin was grave and cryptic. "There are two dragons and they fight for supremacy. Only one can win. While two dragons are awake, there can be no peace, no stability, and no kings. You have awoken the White Dragon, Lord Vortigern. And it shall rock the world and bring much sadness to those blessed by the Red Dragon."

The druid would say no more, despite Vortigern's pleas. Outraged, Vortigern ordered Merlin from his hall, but Vortigern's greatest chieftain, Uther, had heard Merlin's words and understood what was meant. He gave Merlin a place in his own hall, and the two become friends and allies, while Vortigern made plans with the foreign warlords.



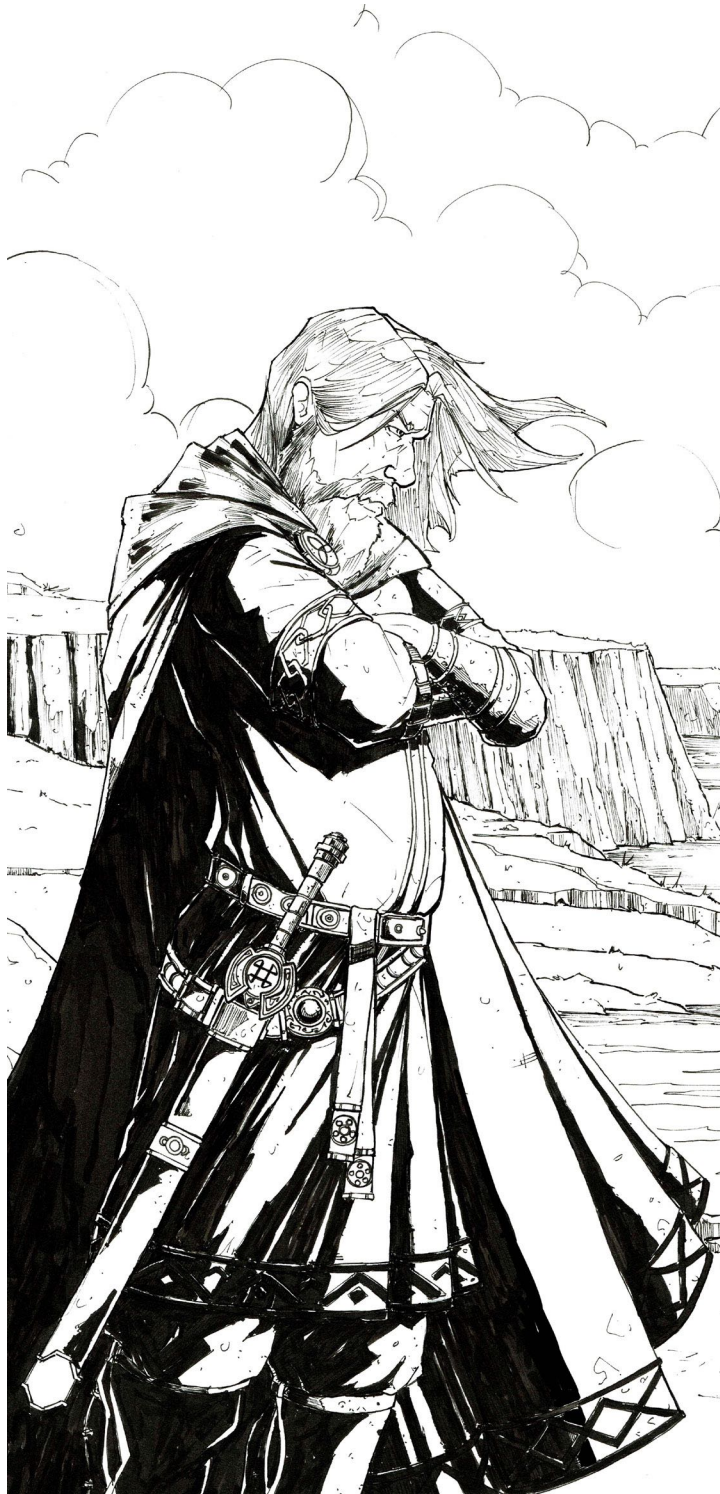
sheep; and be treated with the honour and respect the Celts were famed for. Mercenaries duly came — in small numbers at first, with only three ships making the journey to pledge themselves to Vortigern's cause. Vortigern, as High King of the Britons, made good on his promises and so more warriors, the Saxons (so-called for their knives, known as seax), came to the island.

Vortigern and his Saxon mercenaries, led by Hengest and Horsa, took his campaign to the lands beyond the Wall and failed. Repelled by the harsh landscape and overwhelmed by the ferocity of the Pictish tribes, his army had no option but to retreat. He blamed the Saxon mercenaries for this defeat, claiming poor organisation and even treachery — anything but admit that his own ambition lay at the heart of the failure. Vortigern reneged on his promises, demanding the Saxons leave Britain even though lands and rights had been granted. The Saxon leaders, Horsa and Hengest, demanded that the promises be kept. Furthermore, they warned that more of their people were coming, encouraged by all that Vortigern had offered. Vortigern refused and so began the war between the Celts and Saxons that would dominate the next one hundred years.

Some of the Celtic tribes sided with Vortigern. Others, such as the Dumnonii, led by Uther, would have no part in Vortigern's hubris and left the alliance. This divided the Celts into two separate regions (those loyal to Vortigern in the east and those loyal to Uther in the west) and greatly weakened both. Horsa and Hengest, strengthened by the mass of Saxons arriving in larger and more frequent numbers, made war against Vortigern. The East Celts and Saxons clashed in four battles waged across the southeast of Britain. Horsa was slain in 455. Hengest and his son, Esc, continued the war with Vortigern as subsequent waves of Saxons landed in the east and south of Britain. Vortigern managed to slow the Saxon advance and made continual pleas to Uther for help to drive them completely from the shores. Uther refused. By now, invaders from Ireland plagued the western coast and all of Uther's energies were consumed with battling them, as well as dealing with several long-standing tribal feuds that had asserted themselves in the wake of the split from Vortigern. Thus, the eastern tribes found themselves alone.

Vortigern was defeated in the year 465, his army routed by Hengest and Esc's forces at the Battle of Wippedsfleet on the south coast. Vortigern survived the battle and offered a truce with the Saxons; Hengest and Esc accepted and a feast was arranged to seal the peace that Vortigern proposed (which gave the Saxons extensive lands between Londinium and the Wall). And here the Saxons executed their own betrayal.





The feast was held in a hall built especially for the truce. Many Saxon warlords and their retinues attended, outnumbering Vortigern and his loyal chiefs. Vortigern was untroubled by this, believing that the lands he was about to give Hengest and Esc would more than guarantee a lasting peace. Again, Vortigern was wrong. The food and drink was drugged. Saxon warriors defied the rules of hospitality and brought weapons into the feast hall. On a signal given by Esc, the warriors rose up for the kill. Vortigern's warlords were massacred: drunk, drugged, and unarmed, they had no ability to fight. Vortigern was seized by Hengest and Esc. He was made to watch as his wife and daughters were raped and then murdered. Vortigern was stripped, abused, humiliated, tortured, and finally beheaded publicly. Celtic rule in the east of Britain was brought to an abrupt and violent end. The Celts who managed to escape the massacre either fled east, seeking sanctuary in Dumnonia and the other regions, or were made slaves by the Saxons. A few fled across the southern sea to Armorica, joining the Celtic tribes there.

Hearing of this betrayal, Uther wept and swore that the Saxons would pay in blood for what they had done. Merlin, it is claimed, said: "The White Dragon is awake and we have heard its roar. Now it is time for me to awaken the Red Dragon and so restore the power of the Old Gods to this land. You, Uther, and your heirs, shall be my instrument."

## UTHER PENDRAGON

Before Uther, his brother, Ambrosius, ruled over the Dumnonii and was attributed the title of 'Dragon Head', or Pendragon, by his people. Ambrosius died during Vortigern's disastrous campaign against the Picts and Uther became king. He took the mantle of Pendragon for himself and was determined to distance himself from Vortigern's treachery. The eastern tribes rallied to Uther's banner at first, but quickly fell to squabbles and feuds that had simmered throughout Vortigern's years of alliance. The Silures made war against the kingdoms of Powys and Gwent, inviting the Irish tribes to land upon Britain's shores and raid deep into these territories. Other feuds followed. When news of Vortigern's death reached the west, it seemed to signal a growing chaos that even Merlin was hard-pressed to explain.

