

THE
CTHULHU
CAMPAIGNS



ANCIENT ROME

MARK LATHAM

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BY MARK LATHAM

ILLUSTRATIONS ^aRU-MOR

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'Out of the unimaginable blackness beyond the gangrenous glare of that cold flame, out of the tartarean leagues through which that oily river rolled uncanny, unheard, and unsuspected, there flopped rhythmically a horde of tame, trained, hybrid winged things that no sound eye could ever wholly grasp, or sound brain ever wholly remember. They were not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings; but something I cannot and must not recall.'

– The Festival

INTRODUCTION

'A certain Cnaeus Gabinius Capito, military tribune in the Third Augustan Legion then stationed in Lindum in Roman Britain, had been summarily expelled from his command for participation in certain rites unconnected with any known religion. Gabinius had, the rumour ran, come upon a cliffside cavern where strange folk met together and made the Elder Sign in the dark; strange folk whom the Britons knew not save in fear...'

– H.P. Lovecraft, *The Descendant*

Rome, the greatest empire the world has ever known, limitless in breadth and power, magnificent in its glory!

The history of Rome is well known – at least ostensibly so. From its founding in the eighth century BC to its fall in 476 AD, Rome was the most important city-state in the world, sitting at the centre of the largest empire the world had ever known. It is easy to point to the great thinkers of Rome, its tacticians and leaders, or its vast armies as the lynchpin of this unprecedented era of Roman might and prosperity. And yet, the real truth is somewhat darker.

Long ago, before the fall of the Etruscan kings who once ruled Rome in their vice-like grip, fell gods were worshipped in secret, their very names deemed too powerful, too evil to utter aloud. Long after the foundation of Rome, those who held power continued to do so under sufferance of dark cabals, through rituals of supplication to cosmic entities who lay, hungering, in the darkness.



The oldest idols of Cthulhu predate the founding of Rome by some considerable time. This one was carried to Italy by Aeneas around 1175 BC, though where he found it is a mystery.

By the year 235 AD, with Rome stretched farther than ever before, something evil, ancient, and unknowable began to gnaw at the heart of the Empire. For centuries, a secret war had been waged across the Empire – a war to subjugate the gods themselves, and to secure power for the ancient deity who had protected Rome since the beginning. But the gods were not so easily vanquished.

Dark gods, trapped for centuries in thrice-warded tombs, were disturbed by Roman plunderers. A secret war was fought between those who would harness this strange power for themselves, and those who feared it signalled the very end of the Empire.

The undead walked abroad in the streets of Rome, heralding terrors that even the most pious followers of the gods could not fathom. Dark cults conspired in sequestered vaults, waiting for their moment to strike at the established order of Rome, ready to pave the way for their ancient masters.

Consuls, priests, and even the Emperor himself burned offerings to deities whose existence could not be admitted to the mob of Rome.

In exotic lands bowed by Roman rule, slave nations sought to break the shackles of tyranny by invoking something far older, and far stronger, than any Roman god.

Across the sea, roused from eternal slumber by a world awash with war, by omens and pagan slaughter, a Great Old One waited for the way to be opened: a cosmic terror that man was not meant to know. Those who knew its name trembled, and only the very brave – or very foolish – incanted it for their own ends.

They whispered it in darkness; they cried it from top blasted hills; they screamed it to the raging oceans.

'Cthulhu ...'



A potent talisman to ward off evil, the Elder Sign is one of the oldest magical sigils ever recorded. No one who dabbles in the rites of the Old Ones can afford to do so without the Elder Sign's protection.



The servants of Cthulhu can be found across the Roman Empire, but favour isolated places near the sea, where beacons burn bright to guide the way for the true descendants of the Great Old One.

The Priesthood of Rome

The line of emperors was always beholden to the priesthood – the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* –

for they were the keepers of the sacred Sibylline books, from which they augured the fate of the Empire. Some of the original books were destroyed, burned publicly in a great show of departing from the old, dark ways, when Tarquinius Superbus ruled as king. Some, however, survived. None outside the priesthood ever laid eyes on the oldest Sibylline texts, such as the collected fragments of the *Liber Ivonis*, said to be bound in human flesh and inscribed with runes that perhaps a handful of men on earth could decipher. The rites laid out in this book and others included ritual sacrifices so blasphemous that even the mob of Rome could never accept them. And yet it was by these rites that the Romans' fortunes were assured.

It was through the prophecies and vile rituals contained within these books that Rome's military ambition was fulfilled. Over the centuries, nation after nation fell to Roman rule until the Empire grew unwieldy and bloated. Few understood the dark pacts that the priesthood had made long ago, with creatures rarely seen by mortal men, and how these pacts guided Rome's destiny from city-state to world power. Fewer still would wish to understand.

If anyone truly knew the priesthood's allegiance, they would surely question why an unfathomable and terrifying god would aid an Empire of men at all; for the quindecimviri sacris were followers of an ancient deity named by the Magi of the east as 'Cthulhu, the Great Old One', He Who Lies Sleeping in R'lyeh. Even those within the priesthood did not question their traditions and ceremonial rites – they just did as they had always done. Some believed that the ultimate victory of Rome would see the awakening of Cthulhu, and the freeing of that dark and terrible Old One from his prison in sunken R'lyeh. Perhaps they believed that day would be an auspicious one, and that the final fate of all men should not be unleashed upon Cthulhu's faithful servants. The Magi always held that mortals are immaterial to Cthulhu; that he is a capricious and destructive god, from a place and time far removed from our own pantheons. But none, of course, can know the truth of it.



The melding of old gods and new for political purposes represented great danger for those not inducted into Cthulhu's mysteries.

Dark Corners of the Empire

By 50 AD, Rome ruled most of the Mediterranean: 150 years later, it was head of the largest Empire ever seen, stretching from Britannia in the west to Parthia in the east. With each new conquest, Rome acquired not only land and wealth, but slaves, gladiators, and soldiers. Those citizens of far-flung territories who embraced the Roman way of life prospered – so much so that many lords and ladies betrayed their people for a place at the governor’s table.

For the common people, it must have seemed as though the gods themselves had abandoned them. However, in many places, shamans and holy men saw the Romans as usurpers, followers of foreign gods who would ultimately pay for their blasphemy. The most fervent resistance to Roman rule came from the most devout followers of mysterious deities. Many of these gods had been worshiped since times before Rome had even existed. Their supplicants would not be so easily swayed from their faith.

By the order of the emperors, all artefacts of divine provenance discovered within newly conquered territories were to be returned to Rome, where they would be inspected and destroyed by the priesthood. This was a secret order, enforced by Rome’s network of spymasters, the *frumentarii*, and no common soldier ever learned the significance of what he found, desecrated, or stole. With each temple or tomb that was sacked by the Romans, and each sacred text burned, the power of the foreign gods waned. But they did not die. Across the world, the followers of ancient deities gathered their relics and hid them, keeping the old faiths alive and worshipping in secret. Through these faithful servants, the enemies of Cthulhu gathered their strength, watching, waiting, for the time to strike back at their wayward brother.

The Frumentarii

Originally wheat collectors with extensive knowledge of inland navigation, the *frumentarii* were elevated to higher status under the rule of Hadrian, who recognized the need for an extensive network of intelligence gathering across the burgeoning Empire. Though the *frumentarii* were not publicly known as spies, their remit very much allowed – indeed, required – *frumentarii* to obtain secrets from Roman citizens across the Empire by fair means or foul.

The *frumentarii* were usually attached to individual legions, marching in safety to the provinces before taking their leave and operating independently. Ostensibly, their role was to gather intelligence, in order to prevent uprisings and rebellions, and to bring corrupt officials to justice. But there was another, more sinister side to their role. As far-ranging scouts, the *frumentarii* often infiltrated covens and foreign cults, or located secret caches of occult importance. In the name of the priesthood and the Emperor, *frumentarii* were often the first Romans to set foot in forbidden tombs and sealed temples, stealing away artefacts deemed too sacrilegious for lesser men to handle. In the course of executing their duty, *frumentarii* often acquired much occult knowledge, learning ancient languages and magical rites that might rival the most high-ranking priests. Though usually steadfastly loyal and pure of mind and body, some *frumentarii* inevitably became corrupted by contact with forbidden knowledge. Transformed by the burden of secrets too terrible to keep, these renegade spymasters represented the greatest threat to the stranglehold of the *quindecimviri sacris*, and were rooted out mercilessly.



After a long time on the road, a frumentarius finally delves into the catacombs he has been seeking, steeling himself for whatever horrors lie within.

The Broken Legions

It was to Rome's armies, not to its priests, that the Emperor looked to secure the future of his domain.

Splintered factions of the great legions carried out the will of the Emperor and, by extension, that of the mysterious quindecimviri sacris. They plundered ancient tombs in far-off lands, did battle with monstrous creatures that they could never speak of upon their oaths, and slew all who would oppose the rise of Cthulhu. That they did these things without truly understanding the terror they might unleash, or even without learning the name of the true deity that they fought for, was the great tragedy of the noble legionaries.

And yet there were some who were not so blinkered to the machinations of the priesthood of Rome. Some commanders had seen too much, and had come to mistrust their mysterious rulers who lived in luxury and safety in marble-floored villas while soldiers died at their bidding. Others had sworn oaths of their own, to the true god of the Romans, Mithras, who showed them the way to salvation. With each general and centurion who gleaned something of the truth and made the decision to oppose the will of Cthulhu, the priesthood's grip on the Empire weakened. It was whispered that battles were even fought between opposing factions of Roman soldiers, though it would be a foolish man indeed to say this within earshot of Rome's loyal agents. Nevertheless, for good or ill, the legions were slowly breaking, one soldier at a time.

On the long marches across the Empire, Rome's legions fought almost autonomously, far removed from any central command structure. Some succumbed to the influence of exotic cultures and forbidden gods, while others remained stoically loyal to their own faith. From the pyramids of Egypt to the haunted plains of Dacia, from the mist-shrouded isles of Britannia to the old temples of Parthia, the legions endured, and fought.



The legions of Rome were the greatest fighting force in the world, their fortunes bolstered by the priesthood's prayers to Cthulhu.

ROME

The name of Rome conjures images of gleaming white architecture, mosaic squares and bath-houses, gladiatorial battles in massive arenas, and the marching of triumphant legions along sweeping, straight roads. It was the pinnacle of a great empire, having risen from a mere Latin settlement upon the banks of the River Tiber, surrounded by enemies. But where the ancient Romans are credited for their ingenuity, enlightenment, ambition, and strength, the truth of Rome's rise is far more sinister.



A relief sculpture discovered in a long-forgotten catacomb beneath Rome's foundations, thought to depict the true 'divine' nature of Romulus and Remus. Too precious to destroy, but too dangerous to display, it adorned the very vault where the *Liber Ivonis* was kept.

Everything the common man of Rome was ever told, from the mythological origins of the city to the truth behind some of the most glorious battles of the Empire, is a distortion of the truth. That this small tribe was elevated to singular greatness was not some quirk of history, but the product of a diabolical pact with forces so ancient and alien that they threatened the very fabric of the world.

The Secret History of Rome

In a quite deliberate effort by the priesthood, the history of Rome has been confused with myth until legend and fact have become irrevocably intertwined. The Roman people rejoiced in myths that

proclaimed their predestined greatness, never understanding the true cost of that destiny.

The most complete ‘record’ of Rome’s founding comes from Virgil’s *Aeneid* (29–19 BC). In this tale, widely accepted as historical fact by the average plebeian, the Trojan hero Aeneas, half-human son of Venus, escaped Troy with his father and a number of his fellow soldiers before the city was overrun by the Greeks. It was foretold that Aeneas was destined to found a city in Italy, and so he set sail, although the ship was blown off course by Juno, wife of Jupiter, and landed in Carthage. Though Aeneas fell in love there and wanted to remain, Mercury reminded him of his destiny, and so Aeneas once again set sail. After descending to the depths of Hades and fighting a great war, Aeneas eventually founded a settlement named Alba Longa, at the mouth of the Tiber.

According to the legend, it was Aeneas’ descendants Romulus and Remus who were the true founders of Rome. These twins were the sons of the war god Mars and Rhea Silvia, daughter of Numitor, the true king of Alba Longa. Rhea bore two sons who, by order of the usurper King Amulius, were thrown into the Tiber. A flood caused them to drift ashore at Ficus Ruminalis, where they were rescued by a she-wolf, the sacred animal of Mars. The boys were later discovered and adopted by a local herdsman named Faustulus and his wife Acca Larentia. When they came of age and learned their true heritage, Romulus and Remus deposed Amulius with the assistance of Numitor. Together they founded a city; however, in a dispute over the name of this new city, Romulus slew his brother in a fit of jealousy. The city became Rome, named after Romulus.

Even in these early tales, two things stand out. Firstly, Rome’s history has ever been in the hands of capricious gods. Secondly, Rome was founded on war and bloodshed, with brother sacrificing brother to claim the throne.

What no one – not even the learned Virgil – could know was that the true story of Romulus and Remus was somewhat more sinister. According to forbidden texts possessed by the *quindecimviri sacris*, the twins were indeed real, and not merely figures of myth. They were not descended from a mighty hero of Troy, but from a line of demigods stretching back to the shadowy birth of mankind. The twins bore such deformities – stigmata, believed by some to be divine, but by others to be a great curse – that they were drowned in the Tiber. And yet they did not die, for some say the half-human creatures were more fish than men.

As Romulus and Remus grew older, their appearance became more human, and their power to influence the feeble minds of men increased. They performed dark rituals, conducted mass sacrifices, and taught their fanatical followers to speak and read the dark tongue of their mysterious ancestors.

Rome was founded through sorcery and bloodshed, and through those same means it endured. It was said by the priesthood that the descendants of Romulus remained, living among the citizenry of Rome, waiting for their time to rise up and reclaim their heritage. On that day, they believed their great father Cthulhu would rise also, and begin an age of darkness for those who were not devout.

CARTHAGO DELENDA EST: THE PUNIC WARS

In the early days of its expansion, Rome clashed many times with Carthage, a powerful city of Phoenician descent that had carved out its own empire in the Mediterranean. Carthage’s power resided in its mastery of the seas: the Phoenician gods, Baal Hammon and Tanit, were powerful indeed, sending storms to smash enemy fleets, and strong winds to carry Carthaginian trade ships far and wide. The priesthood of Rome had long muttered oaths to Cthulhu, but turned its devotion to him fully in order to secure the seas for itself.

The first Punic War (264–241 BC) was a war of faith as much as of conflicting ideologies. The two great nations fought to a standstill, and the Carthaginian gods felt their power wane for the first time in many centuries. In answer to this threat, a new generation of leaders rose from the military ranks of Carthage. These men had long campaigned in Numidia and beyond, and had

there unearthed relics of a darker, more ancient and more powerful god than Baal Hammon. Bringing pages of the lost Sibylline texts back to their capital, they began devoting their sacrifices to the twisted, elephant-headed god Chaugnar Faugn. Soon, their prayers were answered, and the Carthaginians gathered an army capable of crossing vast distances overland, and of crushing the Romans on their own terms. The army rode upon the backs of elephants, blessed by Chaugnar Faugn, and led by the dark god's most blessed commanders. The greatest of these commanders was Hannibal, who almost brought Rome to its knees in the second Punic War (218–201 BC). Hannibal's famed elephants, which many maintained contained monstrous beasts quite unlike any natural creature in Africa, defeated legion after legion before crumbling at the last. It is said that Rome defeated Hannibal in a two-pronged strategy. First, the great general Quintus Fabius Cunctator ('the Delayer') wore down Hannibal's army by raising fledgling legions, recruiting many men and pressing slaves into service in order to slow the Carthaginian advance. Fabius was blessed by the divine colleges of Rome, and was entrusted with spells of protection against Chaugnar Faugn by the priesthood. Secondly, a group of *speculatores* – elite members of the Praetorian Guard and trained assassins – were dispatched to Carthage to desecrate the elephant god's shrines and slay his priests. Only one of the praetorians returned alive, and he brought word that the Carthaginians possessed many pages of Sibylline texts, including lost fragments of the *Liber Ivonis*. Rome weathered the storm of Hannibal's attempted invasion, and signed a peace treaty with Carthage, but in secret the Romans plotted the fall of their rivals, for the *Liber Ivonis* represented Rome's best chance of ultimate power.

In 149 BC, the Senate, foremost among them Cato the Elder, ruled that 'Carthago delenda est' – Carthage must be destroyed. The auguries were good: that year, the Romans laid siege to the city of Carthage, eventually sacking the city and retrieving many mystical artefacts and, of course, pages of the *Liber Ivonis*, though some leaves were reputed to have been destroyed in the fires that raged through the city. The Romans' victory was so complete that the Phoenician gods who once secured Carthage's status were utterly destroyed. In far-off R'yeh, Cthulhu stirred in his endless dreaming as he consumed the energy of these usurper deities. The once-proud people of Carthage were enslaved, their riches taken, and their fields sown with salt as a reminder of what would befall those who opposed the might of Rome and Cthulhu.

The Liber Ivonis

Originally believed to contain a thousand pages, the *Liber Ivonis* was the oldest and most sinister of the Sibylline books, locked away in the vaults of the Senate in a catacomb sequestered solely for the use of the priesthood. The book – a collection of ancient scrolls – was bound loosely in flayed and tanned human skin, carved and branded with maddening, ever-shifting runes and bearing the painted seal of Cthulhu.

Only fragments of this book survived into the time of the Roman Empire, and they were written mostly in a strange script that only the most senior priest could read. It was this priest's solemn duty to pass on this knowledge to his chosen successor. The book contained many spells and rites, from the simple summoning and questioning of restless spirits, to the undertaking of the 'dream quest' through which the faithful of the priesthood communed with their slumbering god.

The largest cache of surviving papers was found during the sack of Carthage (c.149 BC). Over 30 pages of spells were found, though some were woefully incomplete – the priesthood laments that other sacred pages might have been burned in the great fires that spread across the city. Hope remains, however – two further fragments were later found by a *frumentarius* searching an abandoned tomb in Parthia. The spy barely escaped with his life, reporting that a horned guardian made of smoke and shadow slew six praetorians who had accompanied him into the sigil-warded chamber.



The *Peri ton Eibon* – the first Greek translation of the book the Romans called the *Liber Ivonis*, c.100 BC.

Cults and Secret Societies

By 50 AD, Rome was home to over a million souls, who flocked from every corner of the Empire to make their fortune. An exotic blend of races and creeds living together in a tightly packed, teeming city, the citizens of Rome were born of many beliefs and cultures. It is unsurprising that Rome was home to many strange cults, guilds, and secret societies, all of which operated covertly, pushing their own agendas and clashing with opposition without the plebeians ever realizing the trouble fermenting at their doors.

Cults within Rome numbered in the hundreds. Some were as innocent as the society of wheelwrights, or as fiscally powerful as the *collegium* of Dionysiac Artificers. Others were dedicated to more radical causes, to the worship of little-known deities, or to the practice of magical rites long thought forgotten. Arguably, the greatest secret society of them all was the priesthood of Rome – the *quindecimviri sacris*. Although they operated openly, with a public status on a par with lauded senators, their true goals and myriad ritual observances were known to very few.

The Idaeans

The Idaeans worshiped Magna Mater, a Phrygian goddess known outside Rome as Cybele, the Great Mother. Though the priesthood initially attempted to quell the rise of Cybele worship in the capital, it proved a fruitless task, for the Great Mother was a popular deity across the Empire. Known by many names including Inanna, Agdistis, and Ishtar, Cybele is named in the Sybilline texts as Shub-Niggurath, the Dark Mother, that insidious Great Old One so beloved of the Celts. Renaming her 'Magna Mater', the priesthood ordered that all temples to Cybele's many aspects across the Empire be destroyed, and her relics brought to Rome for 'further study'. One such artefact was a strange slab of meteoric black stone, which fell from the sky over Pessinos in Phrygia during the second Punic War. The Phrygians saw this smooth slab of star-metal as a gift from Cybele, and dedicated it to her. When the Romans found it, it is said that a great magical battle took place before the stone was finally removed and dragged back to Rome, where it was rededicated to Magna Mater, the stone eventually forming the head of a great statue to the goddess. The Idaeans were curious in that many of their number were Gallic slaves, and their militant followers comprised a great number of eunuchs, who are blessed of Cybele. It was the Idaeans' ultimate goal to break the magical shackles placed upon their goddess and return the meteoric stone to Pessinos. If that should happen, the priesthood feared that the barbarian hordes who worshiped Shub-Niggurath in all her forms would rise to unstoppable prominence.

The Order of Mithras

Many in Rome were unhappy with the rule of the emperors, but few were better placed to do something about it than the Order of Mithras. These embittered soldiers sought to restore the world to an age of myth, where legendary heroes and warrior cults ruled supreme. The secretive temples of Mithras sent out their own warriors into the far corners of the Empire – legionaries whose loyalty lay with their deity rather than the Emperor, and who would snatch artefacts of power from their brother legionaries and keep them from the priesthood so that one day they might be used to overthrow the established regime. The Order of Mithras was a superstitious cult who believed that a military coup was the only hope for Rome's future.



To the superstitious common soldier, religious charms were not always a symbol of deep-rooted faith, but merely a way of entreating all of the gods for luck in battle. Some legionaries would wear symbols of Cthulhu alongside those of Mithras, Mars, and Mercury, without worrying overmuch about the conflicting ideologies at play.

The Herodians

A secretive cult heralding from Judaea, the Herodians still practiced magic long forbidden by their

Roman rulers, and the most powerful amongst them garnered a fell reputation for sorcery. Through rituals of sympathetic magic they moulded great beasts of clay to serve as physical conduits into which monstrous entities could be given blasphemous life. More than once, lumbering monsters – known to the Herodians as ‘golems’, but named in the *Liber Ivonis* as ‘Gugs’ – tore through the immigrant slums of the Aventine and Emporium, only to be brought down by legionaries and *vigiles* – the city watchmen – at a great cost in Roman blood. With each rampage, it became harder for the priesthood to suppress tales of monsters within the city itself.

It was whispered that the Herodians summoned a cult of assassins from far Judaea to do their bidding. Belonging to an ancient order, these *sicarii* (‘dagger-men’) were highly trained killers, masters of poisons and blades, with a predilection for dark magic. The *sicarii* were desperate men, for their hatred of the Romans knew no bounds, driving them to jeopardize their very souls in their thirst for vengeance. In 160 AD, the celebrated prefect Quintus Lollius Urbicus – former governor of Britannia – almost succeeded in tracking down the heads of the Herodian cult within the Aventine, only to be murdered under mysterious circumstances. Urbicus was renowned as a moderate man, who embraced the melting-pot of cultures within Rome, and yet he was afforded no mercy. Such was the gruesome and inexplicable manner of his death that his predecessors shied away from offending the Herodians forever after, much to the chagrin of the priesthood.



Roman archers try to bring down a marauding Gug in the narrow streets of the Aventine.

Long believed to be the subject of myth, the ancient Greek cult of Hera, known colloquially as the Argonauts, was a secret society which remained active for centuries. Dedicated to reclaiming long-lost sacred artefacts of the Olympian gods, the Argonauts found themselves opposed to the priesthood due to the Romans' plunder of ancient sites of power.

Though Greece was a power long spent, there were those nobles who still remembered the old tales and secretly worshiped the old gods. These wealthy patrons lent resources to the Argonauts, who trained warriors to be as bold and hardy as Jason himself, and used their wealth to manipulate Rome's enemies, particularly the Persians and the barbarians of Germania and Britannia. Led only by men said to be of Jason's line, the Argonauts sought to wrest artefacts of great power from the hands of the priesthood and protect them until such time as they could be used for the good of all.

The leaders of this estimable cult had in their possession a copy of the *Peri ton Eibon*, a fragmentary Greek translation of the *Liber Ivonis*. *The Book of Eibon* was considered the utmost heresy by the priesthood, as it made accessible all the rites for so long written only in the sacred *aklo* script. With this book, the Argonauts deciphered much of the priesthood's plans. While the information contained within these scraps was insufficient to cause real harm to the priesthood's ambitions, it was enough to convince the Argonauts of Cthulhu's manifest evil, and of Rome's utter corruption.

The Priests of Iram

Unknown to the priesthood of Rome, a religious sect operated in subterranean caverns beneath the city's streets. Founded by Arabian slaves and joined by many desperate men and women, this cult claimed to have been founded in the fabled lost city of Iram, which was once home to the 'Elder Ones'. Upon the altar of their principal temple was a relic so powerful that it shone with dark light and pulsed with energy. All who drew near to it would receive thoughts that were not their own, their wills fully subverted by the bizarre, alien fossil.

The high priests could not enter the temple without first imbibing a concoction of mind-altering herbs, for otherwise they would go mad from the many voices inside their minds. The high priests transcribed messages from the relic and conducted the will of their fossil-god to their followers. For the relic was no mere idol: it was a carrion-lord, a creature whose body is long dead but whose soul lives on, trapped for ever. It was man-sized and barrel-shaped, with tendrils and a five-stemmed 'head' atop its strange, fungal body. Its great wings were outstretched from the altar, fastened to pillars either side of the temple, while its petrified body sat inert like some bulbous, blasphemous statue.

It called itself the Alter Prioris, the 'Elder Thing', and though its messages were too rapid and complex for human minds to comprehend, slowly, gradually, it taught its disciples its ways: ways of magic, of science, and of summoning.



The Alter Prioris communicated its will only through the Priests of Iram; others who heard the manifold voices of the Elder Thing scratching inside their heads were driven irrecoverably mad.

The Simonians

The worshippers of Jupiter and Minerva within the capital hid amongst their number a small but

growing sect of hedonistic occultists. Taking their lead from their founder, Simon Magus, the Simonians were ostensibly a gnostic cult, growing in the second century AD after an influx of nobles and slaves from Syria Palaestina. The Simonians did not truly follow the Roman gods, but instead venerated their order's founders – Simon and his wife, Helena – in the guises of Zeus and Minerva.



Simon of Gitta, *c.*37 AD. The infamous sorcerer was rumoured to be behind Tiberius' death, though accounts on the matter vary considerably.

Simon Magus was a sorcerer and theurgist of some repute. Proclaiming himself first a messiah, and then a god, he was called 'the Great One' by the Samaritans, owing to his mastery of the dark arts. Reputedly, he was able to levitate at will, to change his form, and to raise the dead. Indeed, those who practiced Simon's fragmentary rituals were believed to be necromancers of great power and to populate their subterranean hiding-places with reanimated, cadaverous sentinels which feasted upon the flesh of intruders.

The priesthood did not know for certain which of the Elder Gods or Great Old Ones imbued Simon Magus with such power, but it was certain that he was opposed to Cthulhu. His followers continued to practice hedonistic and depraved rituals, believing that no physical act could be either good or evil but could only bring them closer to their mysterious founder, whom they venerated as 'the one who shall abide forever'. To the priesthood, only its own deity could lay claim to such an epithet, and so it rooted out the Simonians wherever they could, hoping to learn their secrets and then destroy them.



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Many legionaries dreaded the day that orders would be given by the priesthood to open some ancient temple or sealed catacomb. Many tales abounded from wild-eyed veterans of the horrors that lurked in darkened chambers beneath the red-litten world.

The Quindecimviri Sacris

From their gilded temple-college within the Senate, the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* – one of four major colleges of the priesthood of Rome – extended their political reach and ambition. Due to their strict control of the Sibylline texts and other relics of great power, the *quindecimviri sacris* became the most important of all the religious *collegia* (the other *collegia* being the *pontifices*, *augures*, and *epulones*), holding considerable influence even over the Pontifex Maximus – Rome’s high priest – himself. When officials of Rome spoke of the ‘priesthood’, it was not the common holy man, or *flamen*, to whom they referred, but rather this shadowy council of 15.

The *quindecimviri sacris* advised (some would say ‘controlled’) the Emperor and Senate on all matters of import, from the arrangement of public feasts and the timing of the great arena games to the waging of war. Indeed, many say it was the priesthood that really overthrew the kings of old, leading to the formation of the Senate and the establishment of a long line of puppet-emperors to be the head of the new republic.



The gladiatorial arena was the priesthood’s way of circumventing the Empire’s outlawing of human sacrifice. Through the symbolic appearance of gladiators like the *myrmillo* and *retiarius*, Cthulhu was often represented in the arena.

The fall of the Roman kings was assured when Tarquinius turned upon Atilius, the chief of the *decimviri sacrorum*. Atilius asserted that the ‘Great Old One’ had spoken to him in a dream, outlining

the relinquishing of the King's power to the growing priesthood. Tarquinius ruled that Atilius had committed treason, and that if he was so enamoured with the great god of sunken R'lyeh, he could join him at his earliest convenience. Atilius was stitched into a sack upon the King's orders, rowed out to sea and tossed overboard. Rather than quell the priesthood, the incident galvanized it; Cthulhu showed it the way to true power, and that way did not include the antiquated monarchy. The priesthood controlled many facets of daily life in the Empire, most notably religious practices. Gone were the days of dark ritual and sacrifice performed by any passing conjurer or shaman. Now, the many faces of Cthulhu were hidden behind socially acceptable avatars, such as Jupiter, Neptune, and Mars.



A patrician of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, keepers of the Sibylline texts, and most powerful priests in Rome.

The practice of ‘magic’ was outlawed across the Empire. The *quindecimviri sacris* ensured that the state-sanctioned religions, as governed by the pontifices, included amongst their tenets dictates warning against the *magi*, *sagae*, and all other practitioners of forbidden rites. Of course, these strictures were put in place only to make the power of the priesthood absolute, for the practice of

magical rites was essential to the continued prosperity of Rome. Citizens unwittingly took part in magic daily, their libations and sacrifices at altars across the Empire lending power to the priesthood's covert rituals. Even the gladiatorial arenas were part of the great rituals to appease Cthulhu; unwitting slaves were bedecked with the icons of Cthulhu's enemies, such as the trident and net of Nodens, and forced to compete to the death. The arena's sands were awash with blood, and from the fallen the priesthood augured the fortunes of the Empire.

True sorcerers, however, still existed. The druids of Britannia and Germania, the viziers of the Black Pharaoh of Egypt, and the Magi of Parthia were among the most powerful and feared practitioners of magic in the Empire. Their very existence weakened the power of Rome. Their stubborn refusal to bow to Rome or succumb to the legions was a source of constant chagrin to the priesthood.



In the most opulent villas of senior Roman figures, what appear to be little more than hedonistic festivals in celebration of the household spirits are often much more sinister.

Cthulhu Worship in Rome

Behind closed doors, the rich and powerful of Rome gave praise to Cthulhu as they have been instructed to do by the priesthood. *Lararia*, or household shrines, containing statuettes of tentacled creatures sat side by side with idols of Jupiter, Apollo, and Minerva, yet the rituals demanded of the great houses of Rome went far beyond mere prayer. The plebeians would have baulked if they had

witnessed the hedonistic festivals held in honour of this strange, alien god: slaves provided by wealthy *lanistae* – trainers of gladiators – were forced to fight to the death as entertainment during lavish feasts, the entrails of the fallen used as auguries in strange rituals; decadent orgies were held within steaming bath-houses, in which some of the attendants bore disturbing deformities – cephalopodan ‘stigmata’ of repulsive and yet somehow alluring appearance. It was said that one in 100,000 noble-born babes of Rome bore similar deformities. Many of these were sacrificed to Great Cthulhu; some were hidden away by their distraught parents, or sent far from the capital; others still were taken by the priesthood for some great, unknown fate.



Though only the 15 priests of the *quindecimviri sacris* were inducted into the deepest mysteries of Cthulhu, they maintained a cult of novitiates from other religious colleges, notably the *pontifices*, *augures*, *vestales*, *flamines*, and the *septemviri epulonum*. This Cult of Cthulhu operated in secret, carrying the priesthood's decrees to the noble houses of Rome, and offering candidates for consideration when the priesthood required new members.

BESET BY BARBARIANS

At every frontier of the Empire, Rome was beset by marauding barbarians, comprised of many disparate peoples fighting for their own identity in the face of Roman invasion. And yet they possessed power that Rome craved – knowledge of ancient gods, an attunement with the earth’s vast energy, and strange relics of civilizations past.

Across the Roman Empire, rumours abounded of the barbarians’ strange customs and supernatural powers. The druids of Britannia, Gaul, and Numantia, it was said, could turn aside arrows and make potions that increased the strength of their warriors. The men of Germania, including the much-feared Goths, were believed to run with beasts, some being more wolf than man, while their filth-encrusted witches foretold the future in the entrails of slaughtered cattle.

‘To plunder, to slaughter, to steal, these things they misname empire; and where they make a wilderness, they call it peace.’
– Tacitus

Britannia

Across windswept moors, rocky shores, and deep woods, the tribes of Britannia were a constant thorn in the side of Rome’s plans. Shepherded by the druids, an ancient order that guarded arcane secrets, the Britons were ever restless and full of rebellion.

In 58 AD, after a tumultuous period of occupation, Gaius Suetonius Paulinus was ordered to Britannia as governor by the Emperor Nero. The augurs had predicted that an uprising would occur on those troubled isles, and the priesthood hand-picked Paulinus to defend Roman interests against the barbarians. A proven commander and loyal inductee of the Cthulhu mysteries, Paulinus set about at once weakening the magic in which Britannia was steeped. He waged a vigorous and zealous campaign against the druids, whose power had so far protected Britannia from the inexorable advance of Cthulhu’s influence.



Little is known of Gaius Suetonius Paulinus' early life. The earliest record dates from 42 AD, during the reign of Claudius, when he suppressed a revolt in Mauretania and became the first Roman to cross the Atlas Mountains. When he was appointed governor of Britain, only the area southeast of a line between the Wash and the Severn estuary was under Roman control – a situation he set about changing at once.

THE CULT OF NUADA

Roman scholars attributed much of druidic worship to a 'triad' of deities, originating in Gaul and venerated across the Celtic world in one form or another. Most commonly the principal deities were named as Teutates ('the Protector'), Esus ('the Lord'), and Taranis ('the Thunderer'), with myriad lesser deities and guardian spirits invoked for a variety of purposes, much as in Rome. In Britannia, something different united the druids – a secret cult that tapped the very peculiar magic of the ancient isles, and was particularly attuned to the sea. By the practice of drowning sacrifices, this cult protected their realm from invasion, repelling several Roman attacks before the magic of Great Cthulhu eventually prevailed. However, the worship of their mysterious sea-god continued in secret enclaves: with each sacrifice to him, Roman power in Britannia was weakened, giving heart to dissidents and paving the way for rebellion.

The priesthood of Rome studied the practices of this cult, who called their terrible god 'Nuada' of the Silver Hand, and came to recognize this deity as none other than Nodens, mentioned in the Liber Ivonis as the Lord of the Great Abyss. Depicted as a white-haired man with a great fish tail, the Romans traditionally appeased Nodens through the sanitized worship of Neptune; but in Britannia his followers embraced his capricious, wild aspects, and Nodens thus enjoyed great power and freedom.

One of the Elder Gods, Nodens' power was waning due to his dwindling worship, but it had once surpassed that of the Great Old Ones. He often appeared as a benevolent protector, which accounted for his willingness to watch over the druids and thwart Roman conquest, but his true motives were much more sinister, at least to Roman minds. Nodens was a hunter, who enjoyed the sport of tracking and slaying the servants of the Great Old Ones. In these endeavours, Nodens employed his physical servants, the Nightgaunts. These faceless, horned, winged creatures were also worshipped by the druids, and the Roman authorities in Britannia struggled to quell tales of legionaries being carried off by Nodens' demonic servants.

The Druids

Paulinus, like his predecessor Quintus Veranius, understood all too well that the reason why the Romans had been so vehemently opposed in Britannia was because of the influence of the druids. Initially discounted as little more than primitive priests, the Romans soon learned that the druids' history went back a long way indeed, and that they held positions of power in Britannia that even the priesthood of Rome did not enjoy back in the Empire's capital. The druids were the glue that held the disparate Celtic tribes together; high priests, advisors, healers, law-speakers, diplomats, sorcerers, and scholars, the druids had carved out for themselves the most invaluable and highly regarded roles in the barbarians' society. Paulinus ruled that none should be so highly regarded by a subjugated people, save the Emperor himself.



And yet, for every druid put to death, others seemed to appear like the heads of the mythical hydra, rabble-rousing and encouraging insurrection. The druids had no fixed place of worship save for a few stone circles so old that not even the oldest among them could remember their original purpose. Neither did they possess holy texts, instead committing ancient rituals to memory through many years of study. Their faith was passed on through folklore, and it was said that the very act of storytelling was a method of spellcraft for a druid, and that to heed his words too closely was to invite bewitchment just as surely as drinking his magical potions.

The druids were not peaceful holy men like many of those from other conquered nations. Sacrifice was commonplace, both human and animal. Slaves, conquered enemies, and even willing volunteers were slaughtered like cattle or burned in massive effigies in order to gain the blessings of ancient, forbidden gods whose names could not be uttered. It was this practice that Paulinus used to swing opinion against the druids and to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of their followers. The Romans, he said, were not nearly so bloodthirsty. The Romans would offer peace and progress, while the druids offered only death. When he had garnered enough support, Paulinus marched on the one true stronghold of the druids in all the isles of Britannia – the Isle of Mona.



Druid dedicated to the Elder God, Nodens.

The Plant y Daear and Plant y Môr

The other great protectors of the druids and their followers came in the form of devilish spirits, which the common Britons referred to as ‘fair-folk’. In the western parts of Britannia they spoke of a fairy court of the *Tylwyth Teg*. The members of this court could take many forms, from beautiful nymphs

and human-like maidens to tiny sprits and hideous reptilian serpent-folk. Near the sacred groves of the druids, the Romans knew not to loiter after dark except in large numbers, for the Wild Hunt of the Tylwyth Teg claimed the lives of many unwary men.

Of these fairy spirits, those that resided upon the Isle of Mona were the most powerful, and the least likely to shy away from human contact. Beneath ancient barrows there dwelt the *Plant y Daeear*, the Children of the Earth: ugly, misshapen dwarves with reptilian eyes and wicked claws, lurking in the darkness to drag wounded legionaries to the underworld. Along the rocky beaches, the river passes were protected by the *Plant y Môr*, the Children of the Sea, who were believed to be men with either the heads or tails of great fish, and who capsized Roman boats at the behest of the druids, to feast on the flesh of the invaders.

Stories of these wicked creatures were whispered around campfires throughout the legions, and as a result there were few Roman soldiers who rejoiced when Paulinus gave the order to take Mona once and for all.



A Ban'shee – a Celtic druidess from the Isle of Mona. Devoted to Nuada, Shub-Niggurath and other forbidden gods, the Ban'shee were the favoured daughters of the Tylwyth Teg, said to have blood of the faeries flowing in their veins.

The Isle of Mona

Paulinus went about mustering support for his decisive attack on Mona. He spread tales amongst the Britons of druidic altars slaked with the blood of virgin daughters, and of filth-caked sorcerers who

had long forsaken their sacred oaths, and now worshipped vile deities. For many in the more settled parts of Britannia, these practices were alien, since the people of the province had come to live in relative peace. They believed the stories that Paulinus wove, and readily joined the *auxilia* in order to destroy this island of depravity and evil.

The Romans constructed a fleet of shallow-bottomed vessels to make the crossing to Mona. Some parts of the great strait were fordable by horses, and many cavalymen rode across or swam alongside their horses. Before they were even halfway across, the wails of the druids could be heard, loudest amongst them the screeches of the *Ban'shee*, an ancient caste of druidess rarely seen beyond Mona's shores. At their cries, the surface of the grey-black water bubbled, and the *Plant y Môr* came from the depths, dragging Roman soldiers to their deaths with scaly hands.

Paulinus had planned for such an attack, and had kept his entire fleet clustered around the shallows. His soldiers fought back from the boats with long spears and nets, until the entire river around the Roman advance was choked with ropes and blades, and the water's grey surface bubbled again, this time with the red blood of the Children of the Sea.

By the time the Romans reached the shores of the island, the *Ban'shee* were silent. They stood upon the rocky beach, arms held up to the heavens, long black hair and immodest black robes framing their painted faces. They fixed the soldiers with such an eerie stare that at first none dared advance. A volley of arrows was loosed, but none found their mark: each shot turning aside before striking an enemy.

Paulinus himself, his courage bolstered by secret charms given him by the priesthood, advanced first, slaying one of the *Ban'shee* where she stood. Her eyes lit upon the ornate, many-tentacled hilt of Paulinus' *gladius*, and he knew from her expression of fear that the power of Cthulhu would bring him victory. At this, there came a great uproar; druids poured from the woods, hopping on one leg and shouting curses, until the sky overhead blackened and rumbled with thunder, and the flapping, winged servants of Nodens appeared, circling like great vultures. Undaunted, Paulinus sounded the advance, and his legion raced forward, hacking at the druids until none was left alive, and the beach was slick with blood.

The Romans marched across the breadth of the island, uncovering many more enclaves of druids and *Ban'shee*, and encountering things that Paulinus would not describe. It is said, indeed, that the Britons who marched with him were put to death rather than risk them returning home with tales of the druids' true power. Following this example, every legionary was sworn to secrecy about the terrible things he had seen. Paulinus ordered that the sacred groves be cut down, the altars toppled, the menhirs dug up and thrown into the sea, the barrows opened and reconsecrated in the name of the Roman gods, and the remains within burned on pyres. The greatest magical treasures of the druids – said to include great cauldrons made of gold that could restore the dead to life and a sacrificial stone that could alter the destiny of kings – were carried off to Londinium. Soon after, a garrison was installed on the island, and the primary order of its commanders was to quell any worship of the old religion of Britannia.

This should have been enough to destroy any further insurrection in Britannia, but it was not so. The ancient tradition of the *Ban'shee* was too deep-rooted, and too secretive, to be fully extinguished. Soon, a follower of their teachings would surface to challenge the might of Rome: a warrior-queen of the Iceni, named Boudicca.

The mysterious fate of the Legio IX Hispana (the ‘Spanish’ Ninth Legion) has been the subject of much speculation. All that is known is that, shortly after completing work on the improved fortifications at Eboracum (modern York) in 108 AD, the legion marched north and was never heard from again. That an entire Roman legion with such a storied history could vanish without a trace, seemingly stricken from every record, is almost unbelievable. The truth of the matter is so dreadful that the priesthood of Rome was forced to take drastic action, suppressing records and employing much-feared enforcers to ensure the silence of every soldier and commoner who would dare whisper the name of the Ninth.

In 108 AD, a revolt by the Brigantes tribe had threatened to sweep into Eboracum before the new fortification had been fully garrisoned. The Ninth had met the Brigantes, but had met heavy opposition that put the Roman commanders in mind of the Boudiccan Revolt – a thought that filled them with dread. The Brigantes fled north to Caledonia, and the Ninth was dispatched with orders to run them down, to leave none alive, and to return to Eboracum with the heads of the Brigantes’ lords to serve as warning to the other tribes.

The Ninth marched beyond the borders of Roman-controlled territory, not realizing that they were walking into a trap. Their journey took many weeks, during which time they suffered continuous night-time raids and the hardships of travel across an inhospitable, mountainous territory. The Brigantes had treated with several Caledonian tribes, who lured the Roman legion deeper and deeper into the wilderness where the wild magic of their ancestors was strong. Amongst a range of massive hills, battle was joined, but the Ninth faced no ordinary enemy. They had stumbled into a great range of barrows, housing the most powerful kings and sorcerers of Caledonia’s ancient past. At the call of the druids, these long-dead creatures crawled from their resting-places and attacked the legion. Their deathless, inexorable advance was telling, and the legion broke.

Those who survived were pursued into a labyrinth of caves that stretched deep underground. There they became lost, and one by one succumbed to death. Those who survived the longest must have seen something truly terrible in those dark, primordial caverns – evidence of a time before man was truly man; a time where dark gods cavorted and rutted with humans in the earth’s dark embrace.

The next time any evidence was seen of the Legio IX Hispana was when its eagle was sighted near a northerly border fort. The few survivors of that surprise attack reported serried ranks of skeletal warriors whose touch was like ice and whose eyes burned with baleful fire. They were Romans by their garb and fighting style, but they were not living.

Several more such attacks followed, until the Romans were forced to withdraw from the northernmost forts. The Roman hold on Britannia became precarious once more, until finally the Emperor Hadrian visited the province with two of the priesthood to advise him. After hearing the evidence for themselves, the two priests turned very pale, and in a whispered exchange spoke of ‘Yog-Sothoth’. At once, they prepared a great ritual – one of the most ambitious they had ever attempted. Furrows were dug across the entire breadth of Britannia, cutting off that accursed northern land. Salt was sown in these furrows, and sacred charms laid at regular intervals, before work began on building a vast wall stretching east to west. The Emperor decreed that Caledonia be cut off from the rest of the Empire, never to be entered by any Roman again.



Germania Magna

The lands around the Rhine were long contested by the expansionist Romans, who saw this part of their northern frontier as an invaluable source of raw materials. However, so fierce was the resistance to Roman occupation there that the territory could never be held for long. Not all of Germania was a barbaric hinterland: indeed, many of Rome's finest legionaries hailed from the subjugated parts of this territory, although such compliance was an uncommon trait in the hardy folk of Germania.

The great tribes of northmen and warriors of Germania, which included the feared Goths, were a savage and relentless foe. Their witches long foretold the coming of the Romans, and more than one Roman expedition met an ignominious end in the dark forests, never to be seen again.

The Elder Tribes

Much of Germania's warrior heritage came from its collection of seemingly disparate tribes, descended from Gaul, Scandinavia, Dacia, and probably farther afield. Strong of body and belligerent of attitude, the tribes were ever willing to war with each other, though always ready to stand together against a common enemy, setting aside old enmities only temporarily to do battle with invaders such as the Romans.

Of the many tribes, the oldest and most respected were the Goths, Vandals, Thuringians, and

Saxons. These four tribes once stood alongside the Cimbri, Teutones, and Ambrones, who were annihilated in 102 BC by the Roman general Marius, a transgression against the Germani that was never forgotten. The remaining four ‘Elder Tribes’ gathered to their banners the stragglers and remnants of the others, and grew in power and influence. Though they came often into conflict with other tribes and clans, it was understood that the Elder Tribes held the favour of the gods, and that their wise-women and shamans were the most learned, and blessed.

It is from the Elder Tribes that the ‘skinchangers’ hailed, for many centuries ago, it is said, the early Germani made dark pacts with the ‘god in the woods’, becoming as much beasts as men. Few skinchangers survived to meet the Romans in battle, for their hereditary blessing – or curse, depending on one’s viewpoint – was difficult to pass on through the generations. When a new skinchanger was born, there was much rejoicing, and fresh human sacrifices were taken to the forests and offered to the witches of Shub-Niggurath.

The Wulfkind

Of the skinchangers, the most blessed by far were the *Wulfkind*, the great black wolves of the forests. By day, a true Wulfkind warrior was not hard to identify; they were almost always male, prodigious of size, with wicked white teeth and piercing blue eyes. Their hair grew in shaggy black manes, often styled in outlandish tousles to add to their ferocious appearance, and they adorned their bodies with golden torques fashioned in the forms of the old gods. Around their necks, the Wulfkind wore talismans prepared by the most powerful witches, which afforded them moderate control over their bestial urges. When the time came for war, the Wulfkind gathered together in small warrior cadres or packs, taking the role of berserkers, though rarely did they carry sword or axe to battle.

Their ancestral powers were governed by the lunar cycles, and when the moon was full, their strength reached its peak. At such times the battlefield echoed with the howling of wolves. The Wulfkind circled the enemy, always looking for an opportune moment to strike; when they did, they tore off their warding charms and, with them, their very skins, revealing the true nature of the beast within.

Stories of the Wulfkind were popular in Rome, but were thought to be just that: stories. Germanic gladiators wore wolf’s-head helmets in the arena, and small children were scared to sleep by their parents with tales of hairy barbarians with wolfish grins and great claws. The mythical status of the Wulfkind was a testament to their strength, for few witnessed their battle-frenzy and lived to tell the tale.

Shub-Niggurath

The image of the black goat was adopted throughout Germania by the druids and shamans of the old tribes. Donning animal pelts and horns, the druids maintained a fearsome appearance, and offered many sacrifices to their gods, chief amongst which was the Dark Mother, the Black Goat in the Woods, or Shub-Niggurath.

Venerated under many names and guises across Germania, Shub-Niggurath’s power was formidable. Hidden from the priesthood’s augurs for centuries due to the ancestral power of the druids, Shub-Niggurath’s magic clung to the fetid earth like mist, fomenting in the darkest woods and sacred groves, where it gave form to nightmares, and confronted intruders with sanity-shattering foes.

In the deepest forests, the frumentarii found hidden shrines of great size, formed from the polished skulls of a thousand foes and protected by naked, mud-smearred witches, who writhed and cavorted in

nocturnal ceremonies, giving birth to twisted, peat-black monsters of maddening appearance. Few witnessed the blasphemous birth of the Dark Young, and those scrawled accounts that reached Rome were widely discounted as the ravings of madmen.

In the vaults of the *quindecimviri sacris*, however, these scribbled testimonies were lent somewhat more credence. Tales abounded of relics stored in the vaults, brought back to Rome from the Teutoburg Forest. Among them, allegedly, sat the head of a *frumentarius* that whispered in an unintelligible tongue even though long-dead and continually dripped black blood from its severed neck. Members of the priesthood guarded such heresies closely, for they had all heard the stories from the Sibylline texts of the dark things in the woods of Germania, which wore the skins of men to hide their true forms.



A shaman of the Angrivarii. Though closely related to the druids, the fearsome-looking forest shamans drew their power from shrines of Shub-Niggurath, the Horned Mother.

Battle of the Teutoburg Forest

In 9 AD the Germanic chieftain Arminius, who held Roman citizenship and had received a Roman military education, plotted a great uprising against the occupation of his native lands. Arminius

dispatched shamans far and wide, who put the fear of the gods into those tribes loyal to Rome, and one by one secured their part in a conspiracy against the legions.

The head of a Roman auxiliary force, Arminius went before the governor, Publius Quinctilius Varus, with false reports of insurrection along the Rhine, beyond the Teutoburg Forest. Persuaded to divert his army south to quell the rebellion, Varus rounded up three full legions, three cavalry detachments, and six auxiliary cohorts, and took them on the long forest march north, through the Teutoburg.

Much of that ancient woodland was virgin forest, and the Romans were forced to send pioneers ahead to clear a path. Many times, the legions got turned about as the newly forged roads appeared to twist and even vanish, as though some enchantment were over them. Each night the Romans camped beneath the forbidding canopies of the forest, and each morning they woke to find men missing – perhaps deserted, perhaps dead.



Eventually, near Kalkriese Hill, the trap was sprung. The Romans were spread thin over a long column of march, with non-combatants mixed among their ranks freely. They were ill-prepared for battle. Five tribes of Germanic warriors fired torrents of arrows and javelins into the Roman ranks before descending into the wooded pass and slaughtering all before them. A few suppressed reports spoke of monstrous half-men of hulking size, who fought with claws and teeth. They spoke, too, of slithering, tentacled things, black as a starless sky, slipping between the shadows of the forest, devouring any Roman who fled the battle with hideous, wet, snapping sounds that drowned out even the screams of the dying.

When Varus realized that his army was doomed, he took out his charms of Mithras, Cthulhu, and Mars, and offered prayers that his soul might be protected. From the madness that crossed his features, it is certain that he received an answer, but from what source it is impossible to imagine. In the next breath, he fell on his own sword rather than suffer the fate of his men.

Over 20,000 Romans died on that fateful day, the greatest defeat in Roman history. So complete was the Germanic victory that the Romans were driven from the country, and nevermore were able to hold the lands beyond the Rhine.



The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, 9 AD. Often called the ‘Varian Disaster’, 20,000 Roman soldiers under Varus were slain in a bloody day of fighting. Terrified survivors claimed that the forest itself had come to life to aid the barbarians, and that the Germans fought alongside slithering monsters, maddening of form and redolent with horror.

The Lightning Miracle

From 166 to 180 AD, the Romans were embroiled in the Marcomannic Wars, fought against a number

of Germanic and Sarmatian tribes along almost the entire length of the Danube. This contest over what Rome perceived to be its northeastern border was bitterly contested, and was something of an obsession for the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

Aurelius had been advised by the priesthood that the restless barbarians along the Danube were ready to strike south and challenge Rome's might, aided by their dark gods. Aurelius was uncertain whether to wage war at first until he was shown into one of the priesthood's vaults, where he bore witness to things so hideous that he declared the Marcomanni shamans and their allies *abominations*, and dispatched the legions at once.

In 173 AD, the Romans extended their campaign and pressed the war against the Quadi peoples, former Roman allies who had broken their oaths and assisted their kinfolk against the Romans. During a series of fierce battles, the Legio XII Fulminata (the 'Thunderbolt' Twelfth Legion) found itself hemmed in on all sides by the rampaging Quadi and beset by thirst and exhaustion from a severe drought. The slave-priests who had been pressed into service by the legion offered up sacrifices to their foreign gods: at least one of their entreaties was surely heard, for a great rainstorm began almost immediately, which refreshed the Romans and lifted their spirits. Even as they prepared to engage, the legion saw with wonder their enemies struck by lightning – a sure sign that the 'Thunderbolt Legion' was doubly blessed.

When news of this great miracle reached the populace of Rome, the story had already been altered so that it was a brave Roman commander who had beseeched Mercury for aid. What no one ever learned was that the priests who had so devoutly served the legion that day were Egyptian, and that the god who had heard their prayers was no ally to Cthulhu. On the night of the 'lightning miracle', and for 40 nights thereafter, the streets of Rome were stalked by a robed figure all dressed in black, wearing the mask of the Pharaohs of Egypt. The toll he exacted for his assistance was a terrible one, but one that the priesthood ensured was paid in full.

Dacia

Hailing from the Carpathian Mountains, the Dacians were thought to be the descendants of Thracians, and were a hardy people from a harsh land. They had opposed Roman rule for as long as any could remember, and shied not from war with the expanding Roman Empire. There were many who feared to campaign in Dacia, for the shadow-haunted mountains and dark forests were said to be home to far worse things than barbarians.

The tribes of old Dacia were strange indeed, said to both fear and hold in reverence rotting, ancient creatures that fed on human blood. The Romans believed these to be no more than stories told by mothers to frighten their children, but those legionaries who found themselves attacked in a mist-shrouded forest far from home would attest to the barbarians' true power: a power that the priesthood wished to shackle for the glory of Rome.



During Trajan's war of conquest in Dacia (106 AD), hardened bands of legionary veterans were sent into the caves of the Carpathians to clear out nests of flesh-eating ghouls.

The Strigoi

The *Strigoi* were said to have been a coven of witches once, who spent too long at their meditations, journeying deep into the spiritual aether known as the Dreamlands. There, they lost all sense of their humanity, and attracted the predations of an Outer God of great power. Manifesting itself as 'Lilith', this alien deity infected the very souls of the witches with its preternatural lust for human blood, before banishing them from the Dreamlands forever.

When they returned to their bodies the witches found that they had indeed dreamed too long. Nourished only by magical energy, their bodies had wasted away into shrivelled husks of hideous appearance. When their souls returned, the witches found their physical forms dying – but death could still be avoided. Animating their withered, creaking limbs, they crawled from the crypts where they had long before begun their secret dream-rituals, and found a village that had changed almost beyond recognition. Driven by an insatiable hunger, the creatures climbed into the hovels and feasted on the blood of the living – men, women, and children – glutting themselves many times over until Lilith's dark magic had fully consumed them.

The Strigoi found themselves whole again – young and beautiful beyond imagining, possessed of great physical strength and magical prowess. Each of them carried a fragment of Lilith's manifest

consciousness, which drove them to acts of increasing cruelty. Furthermore, the poor villagers upon whom they had feasted were not dead, but had instead become shrivelled, cadaverous ghouls, bestial and mindless, who had inherited a taste for human flesh. The Strigoi found that they could control these ghouls with but a thought and, finding that their powers waned as the sun rose, the nocturnal Strigoi employed the ghouls to guard their resting places as they slept.

Over the centuries the Strigoi passed on their gift to others – men and women alike – and their cabal grew stronger. They shied away from large settlements, where they were reviled, and sometimes hunted by hardy Dacian knights, making their homes in the endless caves of the Carpathians. Fearful villagers from across Dacia, however, brought offerings of human sacrifice to the Strigoi, beseeching the aid of these powerful *wampyr* to protect them against invaders, to heal the sick, and to prolong the lives of the old and dying.

When the Romans came to Dacia, even the most ardent noble was forced to entreat the aid of the Strigoi, who only sometimes listened. Many times over the course of their battles against the Roman legions, the Dacians marched to war alongside a powerful, pale-skinned sorcerer of fearsome aspect, able to darken the sky at their approach. When such creatures rode to war, the battlefield echoed to the guttural snarls of loping, gangrel half-men, hunting in great packs and gnawing upon the bones of the fallen. No prayer or sacrifice to the gods seemed able to check the power of the Strigoi, least of all an appeal to Cthulhu – for the Great Old One lay dreaming, and in the Dreamlands, Lilith was – and ever shall be – queen.

EAST OF THE EMPIRE

The easternmost part of the Roman Empire, and those nations that lay beyond Rome's eastern frontier, held mysteries that the priesthood dearly coveted. Yet for all of their military posturing and the subtle efforts of the *frumentarii*, the eastern powers remained steadfast. Should they have fallen to the legions and their esoteric secrets been unlocked by the *quindecimviri sacris*, the time for Cthulhu to wake from his eternal slumber would surely have been nigh.

The Magi of Parthia

The Parthian Empire long endured hostilities with Rome, punctuated by uneasy truces. Although never conquered, with Rome at the door and civil war between feuding noble households never far away, the Empire was in decline. And it was in this dark hour that the Magi returned.

The cult of elementalists known as the Magi served in what was then Parthia for generations, using their mastery of the dark arts and the favour of long-forbidden Mesopotamian gods to steer successive kings to glory. Roman incursions into Babylonian temples did not go unnoticed. Signs of coming catastrophe were rife, as slumbering gods opened cyclopean eyes and peered into the world of men once more. This catastrophe could only be averted if the Romans could be stopped in their desecration of the Magi's secret temples: for hidden there, buried beneath the ruins of civilizations far older than any could guess, were secrets that Man was not meant to know; secrets that Rome longed to possess, and that the Magi would protect at all costs.

The Magi possessed but a fragment of their former power. They had learned long ago that the Great Old Ones cared little for the world of men, and so they shied away from their veneration of alien gods, turning instead to Zoroastrianism. The old temples and tombs of Parthia became prisons in which the avatars of the gods themselves were shackled by the Magi's powerful wards. As these temples were plundered by the Romans, so the essence of these gods escaped into the world, and the power of the Great Old Ones was increased.

Of all the very wise remaining in the known world, it was perhaps the Magi who best understood just how dangerous Rome's path was for all mankind. Had they had the power to stop the priesthood of Rome, they surely would have done so, but to challenge the legions openly would be to court disaster: should the sacred sites of Parthia be ransacked and the Magi slain, who then would stand in the way of the eagle of Rome? Thus, their war against the priesthood was always a covert one. Emissaries of the Magi travelled far and wide recruiting priests and warriors from across the world, from druids in Gaul to followers of Mithras within the higher echelons of the legions themselves. Slowly but surely, like the erosion of rock upon a riverbed, the Magi diminished Cthulhu's reach across the Roman Empire, praying that their interference would go unnoticed long enough for their plans to succeed.



A Parthian Magus, carrying a carved staff, a 'Horn of Alû', and the trappings of Yog-Sothoth. Masters of magic, the Magi trapped the essence of many old gods in thrice-warded chambers, and called upon their aid at will in the ongoing war against Cthulhu's followers.

The Rise of Dagon

'... Next came one

Who mourned in earnest, when the captive ark

*Maimed his brute image, head and hands lopt off,
In his own temple, on the grunsel-edge,
Where he fell flat and shamed his worshippers:
Dagon his name, sea-monster, upward man
And downward fish; yet had his temple high
Reared in Azotus, dreaded through the coast
Of Palestine, in Gath and Ascalon,
And Accaron and Gaza's frontier bounds.'*

– John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book One

Across the eastern frontier, clustered notably in those Scythian and Sarmatian settlements around the *Pontus Euxinus* – the Black Sea – the *frumentarii* came upon a series of strange temples, carved into the rocky cliffs overlooking the great body of water. Some of these temples had long been abandoned, cleared of all their treasures. Others were still in use, and actively defended by suspicious militiamen and fanatical, wild-haired priests.

At first, these temples were thought to be little more than shrines to Nodens, in one of his many guises. The priesthood was initially relieved that most were in states of abandonment or disrepair, for surely that was a sign that Nodens had forsaken the eastern lands, and his power was waning.

However, after more investigation, the *frumentarii* began to send disturbing reports back to Rome: reports of secretive cults that gathered for strange rites upon the shores of the Black Sea; of fishing villages entirely indoctrinated into the worship of a fish-tailed god quite unlike Nodens; of hideous, unnatural aberrations found amongst the populace of those villages, with bulging eyes, translucent flesh, webbed toes, and tentacle-like appendages in place of limbs. These villagers were elevated to the position of martyrs, and many flocked from leagues around to see these loathsome creatures so touched by their god.

At the behest of the priesthood, the *frumentarii* broke into many of the shrines and temples of this strange god, and stole away with what trappings and relics they could find in such meagre places of worship. Some of the spies were captured, and tales of their torture were so gruesome as to turn the stomachs of even the most bloodthirsty Roman.

With what relics were brought to Rome, the priests of the *quindecimviri sacris* were able to identify the deity as Dagon, that powerful god of the deepest oceans who had once been worshipped across Parthia and beyond, but had been driven out when the Magi renounced the old gods. The *Liber Ivonis* records that Dagon birthed a number of vast, monstrous offspring, who patrolled the seas in search of R'lyeh, and would surely oppose the rise of Cthulhu. These monsters had, over many eons, created offspring of their own, which in time had mated with humans in blasphemous unions, creating the spawn known as Deep Ones.



The allegiance of the Deep Ones is at best uncertain, and the priesthood became wary of placing too much faith in these creatures, who

once enjoyed divine status in secretive, depraved rituals across the Empire.

Using the sigils recovered from the Dagon cults of Sarmatia, the priesthood came to an altogether more disturbing realization. The Deep Ones and their hybrid descendants, for so long protected and venerated by secret Cthulhu cults within Rome, were not truly the offspring of Cthulhu, but of Dagon. That some of these creatures had long ago sworn allegiance to Cthulhu was testament to the power of the Great Old One. That so many of them now dwelt within Rome, hidden amongst the populace, became a source of great worry. If they could break their fealty once, then who was to say they would not do so again?

From that day forth, the priesthood announced strict edicts to control the number of Sarmatians who entered the city of Rome, checking each and every one for signs of ‘corruption’. The borders around the Black Sea were reinforced, and no more did Rome pursue its ambitions towards Scythia.

THE LOST LEGION OF THE FAR EAST

In 53 BC, the Roman army of Crassus, famed vanquisher of Spartacus, was massacred by Parthian forces at the Battle of Carrhae. Around 10,000 Roman soldiers were captured, the rest slain. Of these captives, many were sent to Parthia’s borders, as was tradition, to serve as border guards. Many hardened soldiers from Crassus’ legions were sent to the east, to discourage any temptation to escape.

Accepting their new lot in life, the legionaries were thrust into a war against the Chinese army of Chen Tang, where they were ultimately defeated and pressed once more into a foreign army, forced to fight for the Chinese in Gansu province.

The Romans took their strange gods with them to China, and there learned of new ones. The fabled, immortal sorcerers of the Han Dynasty took charms of Mithras – and, of course, Cthulhu – from the surviving legionaries. The latter they studied keenly, for they had long known of the legends of the many-tentacled dragon that slumbers beneath the sea, and had prepared for its coming. Seeing that their 3,000-year-old prophecies were on the verge of being made manifest, the sorcerers cloistered themselves away to begin the great ritual of balance, which would, they hoped, prevent the rise of Cthulhu and seal off China from foreign invasion for centuries to come.

The men of the lost legion had travelled further than any Roman before them, and in doing so had inadvertently hampered the great plan of the priesthood.

The Phoenicians and the Spider-God

The Phoenicians were an ancient people who first colonized the lands east of the *Mare Nostrum*, or Mediterranean, almost 3,000 years before the founding of Rome. A great seafaring nation, the Phoenicians were the forebears of the Carthaginians.

Throughout their long history, the Phoenicians were conquered several times, by the Persians, by the Greeks and, finally, by the Romans. In 65 BC, Pompey conquered Phoenicia and declared it part of the newly founded province of Syria. As always, Phoenician soldiers were pressed into the Roman legions, slaves were taken, nobles were forced to swear fealty to the Emperor, and the state religion was installed in temples across the land. The Romans were to find, however, that a people with such a long history would not easily forget the old ways, even if they wished to.

When the first subterranean temples were discovered, dedicated to a mysterious Phoenician spider-god, the priesthood was duly excited. The *Liber Ivonis* had long foretold of the Great Old One, Tleche-Naka, the spider that would one day spin a web between the Dreamlands and the waking world. The priesthood believed that, through the spells of the Phoenicians, they could at last find a way to connect Cthulhu’s infinite consciousness with this slumbering body, bringing him from the Dreamlands, and allowing him at last to break free of his prison in R’lyeh.

The priesthood ordered one of the abandoned temples brought back, reconstructing it stone by stone

beneath its college in Rome, complete with a gigantic statue of the bulging, hideous spider-god itself. Using fragmentary rituals found carved on stone tablets, the priests attempted to commune with Tleche-Naka and beseech its aid in awakening their master. However, they were not prepared for the horror that would unfold as a result.

For many nights thereafter, all 15 of the priests were visited by terrifying nightmares in which they were trapped within Tleche-Naka's web and impregnated with her hideous, voracious young. The priests were much disturbed by the dark magic working upon them, and so convened a service in which they planned to strengthen the magical shackles binding Tleche-Naka to their will. During this ritual, one of their number took suddenly ill with terrible stomach cramps, before vomiting forth a torrent of tiny spiders. He died instantly, little more than a shrivelled husk, as millions of spiders scurried to the depths of the college, to the rebuilt temple of Tleche-Naka.

Too late, the priests realized what they had done. The spider-god was no ally of Cthulhu, and no simple beast to be commanded by mortals. They had given worship to this alien deity for the first time in millennia, and awoken something evil in the depths of their own city as a result.

The terrified priests at once summoned their most trusted praetorians to them, sending them down into the labyrinthine catacombs armed with wards against dark forces, while the priests themselves began spells of purification, lest they meet the same fate as their comrade. In the tunnels beneath the college, the praetorians did battle with a monstrous spider, seemingly made of stone, whose fangs punched through armour and shields as though they were papyrus, and whose baleful screeches rooted even the bravest man to the ground in terror. Ultimately, the praetorians prevailed by assembling a *ballista* within the tight corridors, and smashing the spider asunder with volleys of heavy bolts. Several praetorians began to exhibit signs of infection from spider-bites, and were at once put to death before they could birth more of the creatures. It took three days of scouring the tunnels with flame before any priest dared set foot there again.

The frumentarii were once more dispatched to Syria to uncover as much of the lore of Tleche-Naka as they could, for the Sibylline texts were woefully incomplete on the subject. The spies interviewed many Syrian holy men and raided many tombs and shrines, before sending back cart-loads of relics and tablets to Rome.

After years of study, the priesthood discovered the grave error it had made. Tleche-Naka was said to have come from a land beyond the edge of the world, where vast plains of endless ice had once been home to towering mountains and fertile hills. The spider-god had spun a vast web to bridge the gap between its strange realm and the material world, and with it had come the toad-like Tsathoggua, the Old One. Tleche-Naka's allegiances did not lie with Cthulhu, it seemed, but with Tsathoggua, whose foul image was still worshiped in parts of Africa.

In addition, the great stone idols of Tleche-Naka found in every crumbling temple of old Phoenicia were not statues at all, but the fossilized remains of the Children of Tleche-Naka. Upon the recovered tablets, the priests learned that the consciousness of Tleche-Naka could inhabit and animate these remains for a short time, and even possess mortals through the Dreamlands, impregnating them with her vile progeny. It was impossible to say how many of the fledgling spiders had escaped the college, and now grew fat in the dark corners of Rome. The priesthood could only hope that the Children of Tleche-Naka would not thrive and return one day to plague the streets of their great city.

THE NAMELESS CITY

found their way there, securing trade with the Arabs and exploring the region in the name of Rome. Occasionally conflict broke out, most notably when Trajan conquered swathes of the northern parts of Arabia. Holding such a vast territory, proved impossible, however, and Roman interests eventually shrank back to the borders of the Limes Arabicus, leaving most of Arabia Magna untroubled by Roman interference.

In the second century AD, the Romans made valuable allies in the form of the Ghassanids, descended from the Azd tribes. These people had migrated ever northwards, leaving the southern territories of the Arabia Magna to settle in Syria. Of the many colourful stories and intricate traditions of Arabia that the Romans gleaned from the Ghassanids, the most interesting was a fable of a place called the Nameless City. Every tribesman claimed some knowledge of the place, but no two reports were ever the same. Some claimed that the city lay at the centre of the shifting sands of the Nufud; others that it was completely buried beneath the desert of Rub al'Khali; others still said that it was not in the desert at all, but was an underground city carved deep into one of the mountains of the Hamad.

What all agreed on was that the Nameless City was lost in the heart of the great desert, although it was once a vast port, having been lost many thousands of years ago when the gods caused the seas to retreat and scorched the land. It was inhabited not by men, but by a race of reptilian creatures like intelligent crocodiles, who crawled low on all fours and worshipped a god called the 'Great Serpent', known to ancient tribes as Yig.

Only a small portion of the city was said to be above ground; the rest lay sprawling beneath the sands, perhaps many leagues deep, stretching out in measureless caverns filled with unfathomable treasures left by the gods themselves. According to the Ghassanids, only a fool would set foot in the Nameless City, if it could even be found at all, for the reptile-people still inhabited its Stygian depths. Needless to say, the priesthood dispatched the hardest of the frumentarii southwards within days of hearing the tale.

AFRICA PROCONSULARIS

After the fall of Carthage in 146 BC, Rome set about forging great provinces in North Africa. The first, taken from the Carthaginians, was Africa Proconsularis, also called Africa Vetus, a vast territory of fertile coastal land upon which enormous quantities of crops were grown to feed the burgeoning Empire. Once, this province was separate from Numidia, an erstwhile ally of Rome, but eventually that land too was subsumed by Roman ambition, creating a vast African territory that extended as far as the Atlas Mountains to the west, beyond which the Sahara desert stretches farther than any man had dared travel inland.

Tsathoggua Worship

Many of the more remote tribes of Africa worshiped gods whose names are barely known beyond the bounds of the province. Among these, the most insidious discovered so far by the *frumentarii* was the toad-god, called by some Tsathoggua.

According to the *Liber Ivonis*, Tsathoggua came to the mortal realm with the Phoenician spider-god, Tleche-Naka, where he first made his home upon fabled Atlantis, subduing all of those enlightened priests to his will, and turning them to the practice of human sacrifice to sate his dark appetites. So displeased were the other gods at the arrival of Tsathoggua that they punished the people of Atlantis by destroying their realm and sending it to the bottom of the ocean, where now it is inhabited only by Deep Ones.

Tsathoggua entered a slumbering state thereafter, though his followers carried his message far and wide. So reviled were his ancient priests, and so fearsome his dictates, that followers of Tsathoggua were persecuted wherever they went. Only in the most remote regions of the world, in superstitious villages and isolated communities, did his worship thrive. In the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, perhaps the greatest and most open cults of Tsathoggua endured. There, he was sometimes called ‘Sadogowah’, the Endless Hunger.

The *frumentarii* reported squat, square temples of basalt blocks, unadorned and often hidden from view in deep valleys and amidst rocky crags. Venturing within was difficult, for the temples were patrolled constantly by bloodthirsty tribesmen, always eager to spill the blood of outsiders. Inside the temples, however, the floor sloped downwards into the bowels of the earth, into a square chamber where no light could penetrate. The floor of this chamber was covered with the bones of Tsathoggua’s offerings – human bones – and the sacrificial altar in the centre of the room was overlooked by a terrible black idol, smooth and toad-like but for the deep red gemstones at its eyes. It was said by the local tribesmen that the toad-god was a hungry god, and that fresh sacrifice was laid at his feet each day. The blood of the offering was absorbed by the hideous black statue, at which moment formless demons would push their way through the solid basalt walls of the temple and cavort with the priests of Tsathoggua. The flesh of the sacrifice was carved up, some devoured by the hideous shadow-creatures, and some by Tsathoggua’s priests, whose greed matched that of their dark master.

That not all of the *frumentarii* sent to investigate these temples returned was a matter of much consternation for the priesthood, for as long as one such accursed idol lay undiscovered in the world, Tsathoggua’s power remained a threat.



'This was a squat, plain temple of basalt blocks without a single carving, and containing only a vacant onyx pedestal... It has been built in imitation of certain temples depicted in the vaults of Zin, to house a very terrible black toad-idol found in the red-litten world and called Tsathoggua in the Yothic manuscripts.'

– The Mound

Tribes of Chaugnar Faugn

During the Punic Wars, the collection of Berber kingdoms that comprised Numidia swayed between support for Rome and support for Carthage. The Carthaginians had long held good relations with the Numidians, and many of their greatest generals fought alongside Berber forces, and trained in their ways of warfare.

It was while treating with Maharbal, an esteemed Numidian cavalry commander, that Hannibal was inducted into the mysteries of Chaugnar Faugn. Worship of the elephant-headed god had reached Numidia centuries earlier, though it was often restricted to the more far-flung tribes. However, the keepers of Numidia's war elephants were devotees of this strange deity, and upon seeing their beasts in action, Hannibal was a convert. It was said that, in hidden temples sited in deep caves, Hannibal met for himself the Children of Chaugnar Faugn, who showed him a great destiny ahead. Possessed by ambition, courage – or, perhaps, madness – Hannibal left those caves after three days and three nights, determined to free his country from the nuisance of Rome.

When Hannibal departed Numidia, it was with 37 war elephants, the largest of which was a strange beast indeed, named Suru. This creature was treated with great reverence by the Numidians,

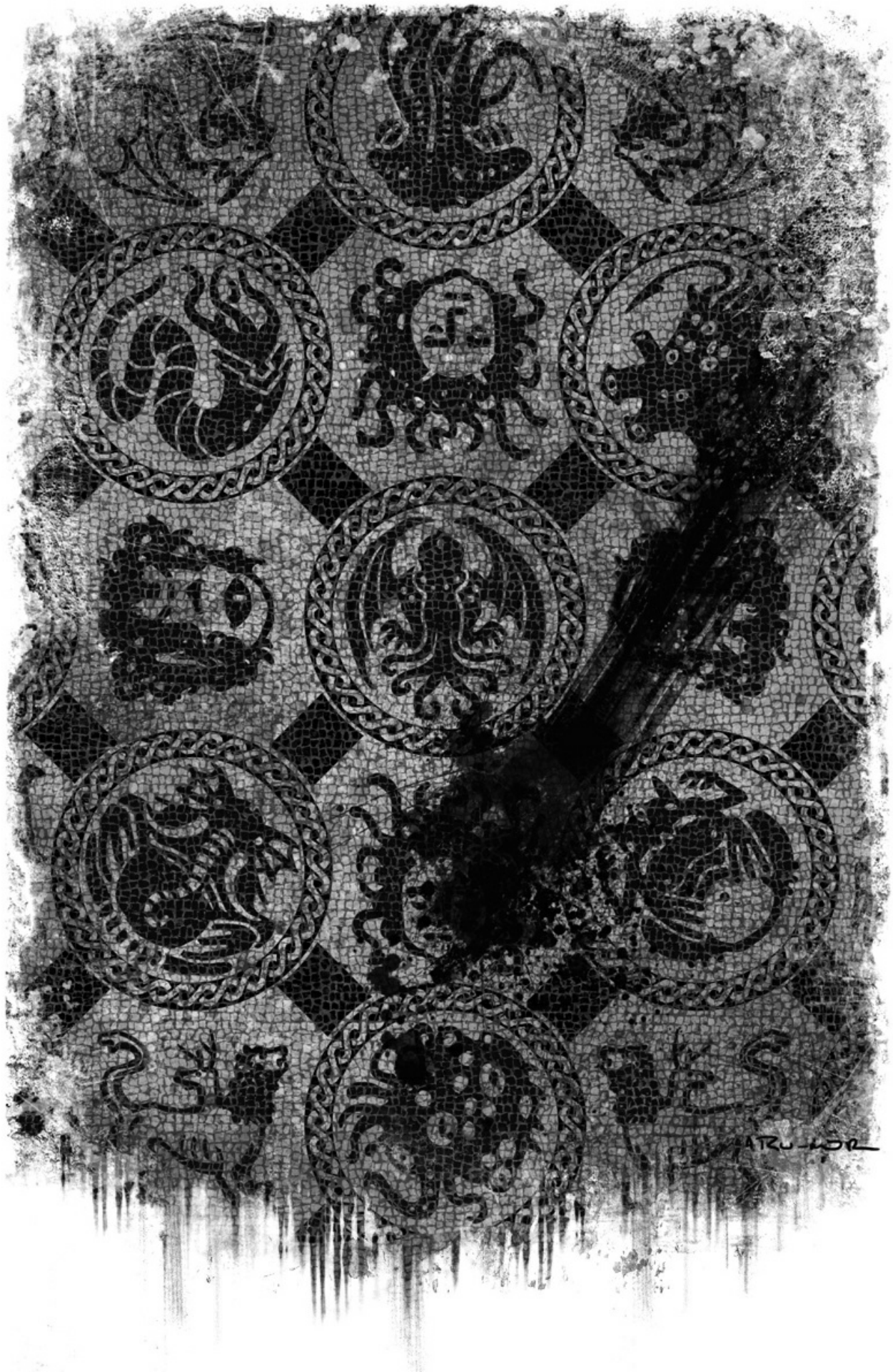
being not only of great size and battle-hungry temperament, but also of singular intelligence and strange aspect. The creature had a single large tusk – while many assumed the other had been lost in a fight, the tribesmen assured Hannibal that the creature was born that way, as a symbol of its divine power. Its tusk was said to hold the power of Chagnar Faugn, although to remove it would bring the most dreadful curse upon the land. Suru was also covered in thick, bony ridges along its back and shoulders, like a rhinoceros, affording it remarkable protection in battle. These abnormalities were always covered by a thick red blanket and painted shields, and Suru was the only elephant in Hannibal's army to carry a howdah. Some said, during his famous campaign against the Romans, that Hannibal would spend many nights communing with Suru as though the creature were a trusted advisor.

AEGYPTUS

Egypt was one of the wealthiest provinces in the Roman Empire. Rich in gold and slaves, its vast grain shipments earned Egypt the name 'breadbasket of the Empire'. So pivotal was Egypt to Roman ambitions that it had even caused brothers-in-arms to turn on each other, as when Octavian had been forced to go to war with Mark Antony. The latter had discovered old magic in the Valley of Kings, and thought that he could free himself and Rome from the iron grip of the priesthood and its hideous alien god; he had not counted on the sheer bloody-mindedness of the quindecimviri sacris, nor on the sheer determination of Octavian.

Although annexed and ruled by a string of Roman governors from 30 BC, Egypt remained very much an alien land to the Romans. Its people's worship of bizarre deities was not easily quashed, and myriad tombs and mysterious pyramids housed mysteries barely understood by most living Egyptians, let alone strangers to the realm.

The greatest regret of the priesthood was that the Romans could salvage nothing from the fabled Library of Alexandria. Once the largest repository of knowledge in the known world, it was destroyed by the Greeks, who believed that they were protecting mankind from ancient lore that man had no right to know. With the loss of the library in 48 BC, the priesthood was left with but a handful of tomes and scrolls detailing the time of the Great Old Ones and the Outer Gods. With so many fragments of lore incomplete, it proved too dangerous to attempt the rituals required for Cthulhu's awakening. Still, rumours abounded that some papers were rescued by the library's would-be destroyers, and lay in Alexandria still, perhaps sealed in forgotten catacombs, waiting to be rediscovered.



'Some were the figures of well-known myth – gorgons, chimaeras, dragons, cyclops, and all their shuddersome congeners. Others were drawn from darker and more furtively whispered cycles of subterranean legend – black, formless Tsathoggua,

The Lineage of the Gods

The most ancient families of Egypt claimed descent from the Pharaohs themselves, and thus saw themselves as divine. In Egyptian belief the Pharaohs stood between gods and mortals, at once both and neither. Some among the priesthood held the ancient Egyptian beliefs to be little more than fanciful myths, used to keep the poor populace in its place – a ruse that they themselves used from time to time to strengthen popular loyalty toward the Caesars. Others, however, granted the Egyptians more credit, pointing to the strange carvings of animal-headed gods walking amongst men, and to the tales set down in the Sibylline texts regarding blasphemous congress between the first men and the spawn of the gods. One need only look to the Deep Ones, they said, to understand how divine blood flows still in the veins of men, and how such men could be marked even after a hundred generations.



Roman soldiers battle guardians of an ancient tomb in the Valley of Kings, called *Ta-sekhet-ma'at* by the Egyptians.

Cults of Nyarlathotep

'And it was then that Nyarlathotep came out of Egypt. Who he was, none could tell, but he was of the old native blood and looked like a Pharaoh. The fellahin knelt when they saw him, yet could not say why. He said he had risen up out of the blackness of twenty-seven centuries, and that he had heard messages from places not on this planet.'

– Nyarlathotep

Of all the alien gods that would vie with Cthulhu for power, the priesthood of Rome feared Nyarlathotep the most. He was the spawn of Azathoth, the Dweller in Darkness, the Crawling Chaos. Where Cthulhu represented strength, Nyarlathotep represented guile. Where Cthulhu was a force of destruction, Nyarlathotep was a force of cruelty and calculated death. He was an Outer God of unfathomable power, who would bind all men to his service and preside over an eternity of darkness.

In the pursuit of his goals, Nyarlathotep has appeared to men many times throughout history, even serving the cults who worship him, often unbeknownst to them. He wears a thousand forms in order to trick humans into his service, and sloughs them away as easily as discarding garments.

The first known record of Nyarlathotep comes from ancient Egyptian texts, describing how, in the earliest times, a tall man with skin of purest black, wearing a death-mask of a pharaoh carved from ebony, came from the desert bearing 'instruments of great magical power.' He taught the early Egyptians much of their great knowledge, from construction to religious rites. For a time, he became their Pharaoh, establishing the rights of the line of kings to ascend to the heavens, whence he himself had come, and commune as equals with his father Azathoth, a deity long known to the Magi of Parthia.

When the Black Pharaoh stepped down from the throne after an unnaturally long time, Egypt was much changed. Nyarlathotep returned to the desert, leaving his magic in the hands of his priests, and telling them that he would now sit in judgment of the dead in the afterlife, so that only those loyal to his memory would live forever. Those who watched him leave swore that he was transformed into a flock of ibis, and flew away. Thus, for his gifts of wisdom, the ibis-headed Thoth was worshipped in Egypt ever after.

To many worshippers Nyarlathotep was a myth, and the more palatable story of Thoth was all they knew. However, there were darker cults in Egypt, who kept alive Nyarlathotep's true legacy. They knew that the hour would come when Egypt would be tested, and that she would need to be ready. They understood that the gifts given to their ancestors by the Black Pharaoh were not mere treasures with which to perform conjuring tricks, but vessels of infinite power, which would one day open the ways to the great plane beyond, and bring the Outer Gods to earth. Much as the Roman priesthood jealously hoarded ancient artefacts of power, so too did the cults of Nyarlathotep search for his instruments, so that they could complete the great ritual that had passed down amongst their brethren since the beginning.

It was said that, on a still night in the Valley of Kings, one could hear the distant sounds of discordant, cacophonous piping. If one followed those sounds to the depths from which they emanated, one might have glimpsed holy men and women in black masks, cavorting with maddening entities while their servants embalm living sacrifices with the bodies of men and the heads of animals. To see such a thing was to glimpse only a fragment of what Nyarlathotep plans for the world.



Roman legionaries sack a temple dedicated to the forbidden god Nyarlathotep.



A priest of Nyarlathotep, wearing the mask of the Black Pharaoh.

Bast Worship

Egypt had not truly belonged to the Egyptians for many centuries. At the time of their last queen, Cleopatra, its rulers had long been Ptolemaic Greeks. For centuries before that, Egypt had been

subject to Persian rule. Though the time of the Pharaohs was long over, however, Egypt's religious practices survived, changing the beliefs of Egypt's conquerors rather than adopting the faiths they brought. The Romans proved no exception. Indeed, such was the fascination with the gods of the Nile that many cults to these strange deities existed even in Rome, and were so popular that their existence was tolerated by the priesthood, if not openly condoned. Some Egyptian gods, like Bast, could almost lay claim to being part of the Roman pantheon, so popular was her cult.

Worshipped long before the foundation of Rome, Bast was an Elder God, tied irrevocably to the lands of Egypt. As protector of that land, she sent her cats as blessings upon the people, and it was widely believed that to honour the black cats of Bast was to ensure protection from harm. Cleopatra herself was a follower of Bast, and her faith in the goddess' protection was so strong that Mark Antony had vowed to fight for her.

Bast had no organized cult in the Roman Empire, but her worship was pervasive. Offerings to cats were made everywhere in Rome as they were in Egypt, each one weakening Rome's power just a little. The chosen of Bast, it was said, could transform themselves into black cats, and even exert control over vast packs of stray felines. It is these legends that caused the priesthood to fear Bast worshippers, for how many thousands of cats roamed freely about the capital? How many thousands of pairs of eyes and ears might they lend to potential enemies?

The Cult of Set

Of all the cults that survived in Egypt, the Cult of Set was perhaps the most dangerous to Roman aspirations. As god of the desert, of storms and of violence, Set was often seen to embody the spirit of Egypt's rebellion. The priesthood of Rome believed Set to be another aspect of Nyarlathotep, although their texts on the subject was frustratingly incomplete. Simon Magus was known to be especially interested in the teachings of Set, studying for a time with a small but devoted cult operating out of Capua.

Followers of Set lurked in subterranean temples, conducting rituals to bring the wrath of their deity upon the Romans who dared to plunder Egypt's tombs and torture its priests for insight into old magic. They saw the Romans' reckless pursuit of esoteric lore as an indication that Apep, Serpent of Chaos, had returned to the world, hiding in the guise of the golden eagles of Rome. And it was the duty of Set to set forth once more and slay the serpent, before the great curses of Egypt were unleashed.

THE RING OF SET

Created by the powerful sorcerer Tchatcha-em-ankhin in a time long forgotten, the Ring of Set is a cursed artefact which offers its wearer the ability to summon demons to do their bidding, but at great cost. Every owner of the ring has died in mysterious circumstances, often being found strangled, clawed to death, or a bruised and broken wreck, even when no possibility of a physical attacker presented itself.

Simon of Gitta learned of the existence of the ring and consulted with the Cult of Set, who desired its return to keep it from falling into the wrong hands. Studying its string of cursed owners, Simon followed the trail to Rome, where finally it was put up as a lot in an exclusive auction. There, it was bought by none other than the Emperor himself, Tiberius.

Certain that Tiberius had no idea what he had acquired, Simon used his magic to steal into the palace and warn Tiberius of the folly of dabbling with the Ring of Set. Unfortunately, it was too late – Tiberius had known full well of the ring's power, and had already tried to use it to do away with his rivals. As Simon looked on a terrible, inexplicable fate befell Tiberius, for which Simon himself would later be blamed.

Under the Pyramids

'Then it did emerge ... and at the sight I turned and fled into the darkness up the higher staircase that rose behind me; fled unknowingly up incredible steps and ladders and inclined planes to which no human sight or logic guided me, and which I must ever relegate to the world of dreams for want of any confirmation. It must have been a dream, or the dawn would never have found me breathing on the sands of Gizeh before the sardonic dawn-flushed face of the Great Sphinx.'

– Imprisoned with the Pharaohs

Beyond the more well-documented cults of Egypt, myriad other mysteries existed in the ancient land of the Pharaohs. Only a few reached the ears of the priesthood, and fewer still were known to the people of Rome.

Rumours abounded of large, jackal-headed men who dragged human sacrifices to caverns beneath the Great Sphinx of Memphis where some mummified god was said to reside, even though no ingress to, or evidence of, any such tunnels had ever been found. The fearful slave-population of Memphis would speak in hushed tones of the huge, leathery-winged creatures that flapped from niches in the Great Pyramid on nights when the moon was dark, carrying off victims for some unknown, yet surely ghastly purpose. Legionaries whispered in dockside taverns of the strange things they had seen – and fought – beneath the pyramids; of dead things wrapped in bandages, shuffling inexorably towards their shield-walls in cramped tunnels, and of scurrying, rat-like creatures the size of dogs that feasted on fallen soldiers.

Beneath the Precinct of Montu, the frumentarii discovered a sealed chamber. Defying the warding sigils, they ordered slaves to break into the chamber. Less than half of them returned to the surface, but the frumentarii had found a collection of strange creatures, resembling scarabs, which had lain dormant for centuries. Impossibly ancient, these insects were imprisoned within a small stone sarcophagus, carved with warning sigils in hieroglyphics that were unintelligible to all but the elder priest of the quindecimviri sacris. The casket, and the ominous creatures within, appeared to be one half of a terrible ritual, granting the means of eternal life, but at great cost. The beetles, it seemed, were not dead, and if the correct ritual could be performed, the insects would awaken, and burrow themselves into the heads of any creature, living or dead, animating them in the name of some archaic Egyptian god. Needless to say, the ritual tablets that accompanied the chest have yet to be unearthed.

The manifold tombs of the Valley of Kings are protected by such dreadful curses that even the priesthood feared to disturb them. Though many incredible relics were uncovered in their depths, adding to the priesthood's already formidable repository of knowledge, their gain inevitably came at the price of a grisly and untimely death for the ones who claimed them. Only through painstaking study and the employment of those Egyptians steeped in religious lore were any tombs opened. Sometimes, tomb-robbers beat the Romans to the task, heedless of the dangers. Such wanton plunder almost always presaged a great tragedy amongst the civilian populace – a terrible murder of unprecedented violence, the destruction of property, or some unnatural catastrophe or outbreak of disease. As a result of the tomb-robbers' sporadic raids, however, no one could guess how many fearsome spells, kingly remains and mythic talismans of Egypt were set loose in the world.



An Egyptian priestess summons a desert storm to cover an ancient burial site for all eternity. Her power is drawn from a vast swarm of large, sentient insects, calling themselves the Great Race, who have long been depicted in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and who are said to hold power over life and death.

MYTHOS TIMELINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

BC

- c.2613 The Egyptian Pharaoh Nephren-Ka rises to power in Third Dynasty Egypt. He revives the worship of dark gods, finds the Shining Trapezohedron, and builds a temple around it. The Pharaoh Snefru overthrows Nephren-Ka, whose name is utterly erased from Egyptian history.
- c.2150 The Black Pharaoh marches from the desert and gives his edicts to the Egyptians.
- 1184 Troy falls to the Greeks. The demigod Aeneas escapes to pursue his destiny to found a great city on the Tiber.
- 753 Founding of Rome by Romulus.
- 666 A coven of witches in the Carpathian Mountains called the 'Strigoi' are cursed by the Dreamlands goddess Lilith.
- 650 The era of the Etruscan kings begins.
- 600 Zoroastrianism takes root in Persia as the Magi realize the error of their ways. The old gods are imprisoned in magically warded temples.
- 578–535 Reign of King Servius Tullius. He oversees the formation of the first Roman assembly, the *comitia centuriata*.
- c.530 The largest collection of Sibylline books is acquired by King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, and entrusted to the protection of his two most senior priests. Among the books are the first fragments of what later becomes known as the *Liber Ivonis*.
- c.510 Tarquinius Superbus, last of the Roman kings, is overthrown.
- 264–241 First Punic War. Carthage is defeated.
- c.220218 Hannibal is inducted into the mysteries of Chaugnar Faugn, and receives the gift of the great elephant, Suru.
- 218–201 Second Punic War. Hannibal comes close to invading Rome.
- 205 The black stone of Magna Mater is brought to Rome from Phrygia.
- c.200 Theodotides, a Greco-Bactrian official, exchanges minds with one of the Great Race of Yith.
- 157 The use of 'malevolent magic' is outlawed in Rome, as a crime equivalent to poisoning.
- 149–146 Third Punic War. Rome sacks Carthage, recovering 30 pages of the Sibylline texts previously thought lost. Rome takes control of large parts of North Africa, becoming the dominant force in the Mediterranean.
- 139 Chaldean astrologers are expelled from Rome.
- c.100 The earliest Greek translation of the *Liber Ivonis*, the *Peri ton Eibon*, is made.

- The priesthood tries to suppress it, but is opposed by the Argonauts.
- 88–79 Civil War. Gaius Marius is defeated by Lucius Cornelius Sulla.
- 86 Sack of Athens. A great many sacred texts are recovered for the priesthood of Rome.
- 80 Chaugnar Faugn is discovered by a Roman legion on an exploratory mission to Africa Proconsularis. It destroys half the legion before retreating to the Plateau of Tsang.
- 73–71 The Spartacus slave revolt.
- 65 Pompey conquers Phoenicia.
- 60 First Triumvirate of Pompey, Marcus Crassus, and Julius Caesar.
- 58–55 Caesar conquers Gaul.
- 54 Caesar leads the invasion of Britannia.
- 53 Battle of Carrhae. Roman legions are defeated by the Parthians.
- 52 The immortal Dragon Sorcerers of China learn of the Roman worship of Cthulhu, and lock themselves away to begin the great ritual of balance that will last 500 years.
- 49 Caesar reveals his intention to rule without the interference of the priesthood. He defies the Senate and crosses the Rubicon, starting a civil war.
- c.48–44 Caesar defeats Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus.
- 48 The Great Library of Alexandria is destroyed.
- 44 Caesar is assassinated. Octavian, his heir, takes control, and civil war erupts once more. Octavian swears fealty to the quindecimviri sacris, and promises to unite Rome on the condition that they grant him revenge against Caesar's assassins. The priesthood betrays its faithful servant for the greater good of Rome, and elevates Mark Antony as its champion.



Rome's history is filled with tales of bloody conspiracies and treachery. Infamously, when Julius Caesar attempted to break away from the priesthood's influence, those closest to him slew him in the name of Cthulhu. The conspirators themselves were soon after sacrificed in a swift political manoeuvre by the very priests they had served.

- 43 Second Triumvirate is formed (Octavian, Mark Antony, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus).
- 42 Battle of Philippi. Brutus and Cassius, the last of Caesar's assassins, are killed.
- 33 Octavian escalates the campaign to wake Cthulhu, ordering the sacking of temples and holy sites across the Empire. Astrologers and magicians are driven from Rome. Even the priesthood quails at Octavian's zeal, fearing he may inadvertently reveal its secret plans and destroy the status quo it has striven to maintain. Mark Antony, dismayed by Octavian's actions, begins to question his loyalty to the secret order of Cthulhu.
- 31 Mark Antony declares for the ancient gods Bast, Nyarlathotep, and Mithras. Later that year he is defeated at the Battle of Actium. Egypt becomes a Roman province.
- 27 Octavian assumes the title of Augustus and becomes Rome's first Emperor. For the first time, the ruler of Rome puts himself on an equal footing with the priesthood. The quindecimviri sacris plot to redress the balance of power.

- 25–22 Military expeditions are conducted to Arabia. A dead Elder Thing is secretly brought to Rome by Arabian slavers and installed in a temple in long-forgotten catacombs. The so-called ‘Priests of Iram’ found their strange religion in Rome.
- c.24–20 Temples of Isis and Bastet are founded in Rome, and subsequently flourish.
- 19 Virgil finishes his epic poem, the *Aeneid*. Swathes of the tale referencing the Great Old Ones and the true nature of Romulus and Remus are stolen, and Virgil is so distraught that he orders the rest destroyed. Thankfully, much of the manuscript survives.
- 17 The ‘Black Rites of Bast’, contained in the Scroll of Bubastis, are discovered in an Egyptian tomb and brought back to Rome.

AD

- 6 Judaea becomes a Roman province. The sicarii travel to Rome to establish a temple of assassins from which to fight Roman oppression.
- 9 Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. Germanic rebels led by the traitor Arminius waylay and wipe out three legions, assisted by the Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath.
- 10 Simon of Gitta is born.
- 14 Using his waning popularity as a springboard, the priesthood does away with Octavian. Upon his death, the more malleable Tiberius becomes Emperor. The priesthood sees to it that its augurs are always consulted prior to any future coronation.
- 18–28 Revolts in Africa and Gaul. It is suspected that several Roman soldiers and frumentarii are captured by tribesmen and sacrificed to Tsathoggua.
- 30 Jesus of Nazareth is executed. The priesthood underestimates his following, and is forever after plagued by the rise of Christianity, which is anathema to the Great Old Ones.
- 31 After three Herodians are put to death in Rome for the crime of malevolent sorcery, a Gug goes on the rampage in the Aventine, slaying 20 vigiles and ransacking a temple to Jupiter.
- 36 The Jews are expelled from Rome, although the sicarii still operate in secret enclaves.
- 37 The Emperor Tiberius acquires the Serpent Ring of Set through one of his nobles.
- c.37–41 Tiberius dies in mysterious circumstances, possibly involving Simon Magus; the people rejoice at the news that Caligula was responsible for his death. Caligula becomes Emperor.



The Emperor Tiberius, who died mysteriously on March 15, 37 AD at the age of 78. Rumour had it that he had recently acquired the cursed Ring of Set with which to destroy his enemy Caligula. Such was his unpopularity that a baying crowd rejoiced at his passing, and Caligula publicly accepted responsibility for the murder, despite suspecting Simon Magus of the deed.

- 41 Caligula is assassinated and succeeded by Claudius.
- 43 Southernmost portions of Britannia are conquered, giving Rome a secure foothold.
- 54 Claudius is poisoned by his wife and succeeded by Nero.
- 58 Quintus Veranius dies in Britannia, believed to be as the result of a druidic plot. Gaius Suetonius Paulinus replaces him as governor.
- 60–61 Following the slaughter of the druids at Mona, the Boudiccan Revolt almost succeeds in driving the Romans from Britannia. Boudicca's mother is widely believed to have been a Ban'shee, thought to have been destroyed on Mona.
- 64 The Great Fire ravages Rome. The priesthood sees this as a sign that Cthulhu is displeased with Nero's rule.
- 65 Nero becomes increasingly desperate to deflect attention from his misrule, instigating the mass execution of Christians to deflect blame over the Great Fire.
- 68 During a reaffirmation ceremony into the order of Cthulhu, Nero is shown a vision that drives him insane. No one knows for sure what he sees, but soon after he commits suicide, engulfing the Empire in another civil war as several claimants to the throne step forward.
- 69 The priesthood conducts a great ritual, and Cthulhu chooses Trajan, a general of

the legions, to become Emperor. Trajan promptly sweeps aside all opposition and assumes rulership of Rome. Seeing one of their own declare for Cthulhu galvanizes the enclaves of Mithras, leading to fractious relations between the legions.

- 79 Herculaneum and Pompeii are destroyed as Mount Vesuvius erupts. The priesthood suppresses rumours of physical aberrations and unnatural practices among the populations of those cities, which appear to have led to divine retribution.
- 98 Human sacrifice is outlawed across the Empire. Sacrifices to Cthulhu continue, however, most often disguised as gladiatorial contests in the recently completed Colosseum.
- 102 The Roman general Marius wipes out three of the elder Germanic tribes, the Cimbri, Teutones, and Ambrones.
- 106 Trajan conquers Dacia and brings it into the Roman Empire.
- 108 The Legio IX Hispana marches to Caledonia, north of Britannia, in pursuit of a marauding band of Brigantes. It is never seen again, in any normal sense.
- 113–117 Rome conducts campaigns against the Parthians, conquering Assyria, Mesopotamia, and Armenia. Many former temples to the old gods are plundered, resulting in ancient demons being unleashed upon the land. The Magi leave their temples and begin a sacred quest to end Rome's campaign of ignorance and destruction.
- 115–117 Jews in Cyprus, Egypt, and Cyrene revolt against Roman rule. Simultaneously, the sicarii claim several notable scalps throughout the Empire.
- c.120–130 Hadrian formalizes the order of frumentarii, officially recognizing them as spies and messengers, and making them a feared and respected order of the Empire.
- 122 Construction on Hadrian's Wall begins, cutting off Caledonia from Britannia.
- 160 Quintus Lollius Urbicus, former governor of Britannia and celebrated prefect of Rome, is murdered after trying to quash a Herodian cult in the Emporium.
- 165 The dread book *Occultus* is written by Hieriarachus.
- 166–180 Marcomannic Wars.
- 173 In a battle against the Germanic Quadi peoples, the Legio XII Fulminata is assisted by the fabled 'lightning miracle' after the priesthood makes a pact with Nyarlathotep in exchange for his aid.
- 212 The Antonine Constitution grants Roman citizenship to all free men in the Empire, regardless of their place of birth.
- 244 The King of Persia, Shapur, begins a war with Rome in the east. On campaign, the Roman Emperor Gordian is assassinated by Mithraic veterans amongst his own troops after they witness his attempts at dark sorcery.
- c.250 The Ghassanids arrive in the province of Syria, and from them the Romans learn of the existence of the Nameless City.

- 324 Founding of Constantinople by Constantine the Great, and the formation of the Eastern Roman Empire.
- 378 Battle of Adrianople between Eastern Romans and Goths.
- 410 The last troops stationed in Britannia are ordered to return home. Alaric the Goth sacks Rome and the priesthood's power is dissipated.

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

When the end of the Roman Empire came, it was not with a sudden explosion of war, but with the slow erosion of its power. By the end of the third century AD, the cracks were beginning to show. Economic, military and, naturally, religious failings severely weakened the vast Empire. The priesthood, as ever, stood at the heart of Rome's greatest failure just as it had guided it to glory for centuries past.

The vaults of the *quindecimviri sacris* were filled with magical treasures, from ancient scrolls and tablets to dark and terrible idols, enchanted weapons, and diadems of great power. And yet the priesthood, for all of its dreams of a world with only one god – the great Cthulhu – lacked true ambition. It had sought for so long merely to deny power to the followers of other paths, that it lacked the will to take power for itself. Over the centuries, the priesthood guarded the sibylline texts ever more jealously, until the words became dogma, learned by rote by priests elect. The mythical artefacts that the priesthood had acquired by dint of war and sacrifice lay locked away, gathering dust, with not a single Roman priest having the intellect or desire to use them, for the glory of Rome or for any other reason.

The enemies of the priesthood, however, had not been so remiss in their duties. Warrior-brotherhoods of Mithras had slowly gained in popularity over decades and centuries, so that the loyal brethren of the legions could not always be counted upon to do the bidding of Cthulhu. Countless valuable relics and precious scrolls were mysteriously 'lost' while being marched back to Rome by commanders deeply opposed to the priesthood's plans. Political manoeuvring and back-stabbing – always an occupational hazard amongst Rome's elite – took on a new aspect, as inductees of Mithras suddenly turned upon their patriarchs, who had long worshipped Cthulhu in depraved ceremonies behind closed doors. These hot-blooded nobles, now followers of an honourable warrior-cult, cut down their own fathers and mothers – governors, priests, orators, and senators – and took their places within the higher strata of society, weakening the priesthood's grip on the political elite one seat at a time.



In the fourth and fifth centuries AD, the power of the Western Roman Empire – and with it, that of Cthulhu himself – crumbled.

The secret cults that had been allowed to fester across the Empire, and even within Rome itself, worked tirelessly not only to bring glory to their own deities, but to subsume the weak ‘official’ religion of Rome. Offerings to Hades, Mercury, Venus, and Mars were no longer carefully disguised prayers to Cthulhu, but also to Dagon, Hastur, Shub-Niggurath, and Tulzscha, among others. Foreign cults had fully taken root across the Empire, too – shrines to Bast, Isis, Pan, and Mithras were commonplace even in the villas of great nobles, where they were honoured alongside the household spirits. Herodians, Argonauts, and Priests of Iram worked tirelessly to weaken the priesthood’s magic and turn the people of Rome from the one thing that would empower Cthulhu more than any other: belief.

More directly, the Magi did not rest while the priesthood lapsed into dogma and apathy. Their black-robed emissaries were sighted in dozens of provinces, treating with scattered bands of druids in Germania, Gaul, and even Caledonia, the priests of Egypt, and the sorcerers of the Far East. The Magi brought not magic, but truth and enlightenment, dragging the priesthood’s plans into the light where all of Rome’s enemies could see the plot that had been unfolding since the time of Romulus. Though the common citizen could not be trusted with the cosmic knowledge of the forces arrayed against humanity, the greatest commanders of the known world were brought into the fold and galvanized to a common cause for the first time in history. Chief among these was Alaric of the Visigoths, who had already begun to vie with Rome on the old frontiers. Now, with the Magi’s

involvement assuring him the support of his neighbours and causing civil unrest across the empire, Alaric decided it was time to escalate his campaign against the Romans. Assisted by druids and shamans calling powerful entreaties to Shub-Niggurath and Nodens, Alaric was almost immune to the spells of the now-toothless Roman priesthood. Alaric's campaign culminated in the unthinkable – the successful sacking of Rome in 410 AD.

The Empire was not destroyed in that one day, but the writing was on the wall. Thousands of relics from across the known world were snatched from the priesthood's vaults. Some were lost in the confusion; some were seized by the Argonauts; others were restored to their rightful owners; while others still were deliberately sought out and destroyed, having been identified by the Magi as too dangerous to be controlled by man. Seven of the 15 priests of the *quindecimviri sacris* were executed for the crimes of their forebears: the German druids chanted songs of Mona as the priests burned, in honour of their brothers and sisters across the sea. As Rome burned, the Magi felt the power of the old gods flow into the land, and the reverberations of Cthulhu's roar of hate and anger through the Dreamlands.

When the Visigoths left, the Roman emperors-elect scrabbled for power, squabbling amongst themselves and directionless without the power and wisdom of the priesthood to guide them. Rome would be attacked several times over the next hundred years, its succession of emperors too weak to hold the crumbling Empire together. Ultimately, the Western Empire fell to ruin, changing the world forever. The Eastern, Byzantine Empire thrived, however; renouncing its oaths to alien gods and multifarious pantheons and instead embracing Christianity, it ushered in a new age of relative peace that would, through fair means and foul, ultimately end the age of gods and monsters.

Their sacred quest completed, the Magi returned to Parthia, never to be seen outside their homeland again. The Dragon Sorcerers of the east woke from their trances and breathed their last, having expended their immortal energy to safeguard the world from Cthulhu's rising. The mighty legions of Rome were finally broken, having been over-reliant on auxiliary forces and Germanic recruits, who now left in their droves, or turned on their weakened overlords.

With the fall of the eagles of Rome, Cthulhu was thwarted, but not forever: for time is immaterial to the slumbering god. As the last page of the *Liber Ivonis* proclaims in the forbidden language of the ancients:

'In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.'

RECOMMENDED READING & VIEWING

While researching this book, I found the following books and other media invaluable, both for informative and inspirational purposes.

Books, Non-Fiction

- Fox, Robin Lane, *Pagans and Christians* (London, Penguin, 1988)
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Film & TV

- *Centurion*, Dir. Neil Marshall. Pathé, 2010. Film.
- *Rome*, Creators: John Milius, William J. MacDonald, and Bruno Heller. HBO, 2005-7. TV series.
- *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, Creator: Steven S. DeKnight. Starz, 2010. TV series.

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Mark Latham is a writer, editor, and games designer from Staffordshire, UK. Formerly the editor of Games Workshop's *White Dwarf* magazine, Mark has since become an author of speculative fiction, writing novels and short stories in the SF, fantasy, and horror genres. His first novel of Victorian science fiction, *The Lazarus Gate*, was published in Autumn 2015 by Titan Books. Mark was responsible for several historical tabletop games, notably *Legends of the Old West* and *Waterloo*, and still turns his hand to games design when time permits.

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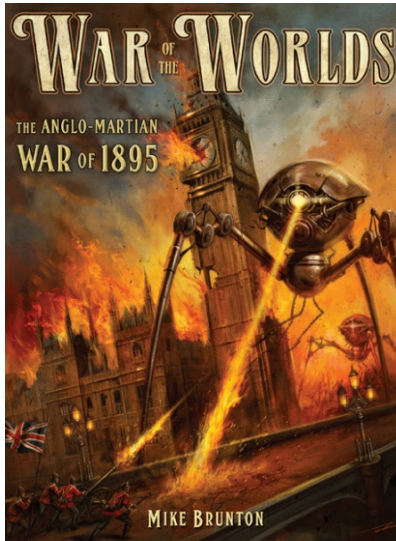
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ACROSS THE COLD VOID OF SPACE, ALIEN MONSTERS PREY ON HUMANITY: INFESTING GENERATION-SHIPS, DESTROYING COLONIES, AND TRANSFORMING HUMANS INTO HOSTS FOR THEIR FOUL LARVE. FROM THE INSECTOID HIVE-BEASTS OF KLAATU, TO THE XENOMORPHIC PARASITES OF THE OUTER RIM, THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE SUM TOTAL OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE OF THE MYRIAD FORMS OF ALIEN MENACE; WHERE TO FIND THEM...AND HOW TO KILL THEM.

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