

Location mythlets

How to take the two-line myths associated with many of the locations in the Dragon Pass gazeteer and turn them into heroquests and scenarios tailored to your campaign and your PCs.

It's such a handy source of inspiration for the next plot, isn't it? A nearby location with a story or myth attached, nicely vague so you have room to adapt it to your campaign. Only... How, exactly? You have a minimal myth. You need to make up the rest - three stations at least, enough to give all the players something to do. And you're staring at an almost-blank piece of paper with an equally blank mind, aren't you?

To start with, let me show you that your piece of paper isn't as blank as it looks.

What do you want?

The first place to start is with your players and their characters. What cults have you got? What interesting abilities (or inabilities)? Any fun backstory due for an airing? Any "named items" that haven't yet been defined? Which of all these do you want to showcase this time? What sort of conflict are you after? Combat, diplomacy, magic, ethics?

Really, this stage is no different from any other session you've designed for your players. Use all your usual tricks at this point.

Make a few notes, give yourself some ideas to choose from, then you may recognise matches in some of the ideas I'm going to throw at you next. Because writing plot is all about pattern-recognition. The human mind is very good at recognising patterns, even patterns that aren't there, if you give it some data to work on. That's why we like doing jigsaws, building up links between pieces until we can get from one side of the picture to the other, and that's what we're doing here.

What have you got?

Let's move over to the other side of that blank piece of paper and take a look at the mythlet. It probably doesn't fit too well at the moment, but that's a good thing. A jigsaw two pieces across would be pretty boring. Let's fill in some more pieces around it.

What's the norm?

The point about a local mythlet is that every now and then, it has to be reenacted. Maybe to keep getting a blessing, to stop something bad happening, or just to maintain the Way Things Are. Being the owners of a myth can be important to a clan's identity, and reenacting it will strengthen the wyter even if there are no other obvious benefits.

What do we mean by "every now and then"? Once a year, on a specified day? (Look at the Gloranthan calendar - days, weeks, and seasons all have significance) Every seven years? Every time we have a new chief? Every time a white calf is born? Every time strangers come to the tula?

Whose responsibility is this? Is it specific to one bloodline? One clan? Maybe the site is so important that it's a tribal matter, possibly even kingdom. The higher we go, the harder the quest is likely to be, and the wider the net can be spread to get exactly the right candidate for a role. A

small clan may have to make do with a Destor PC in the Humakt slot (he's got a sword!), a tribal king will have the contacts to seek out that PC with the really obscure subcult.

Who "usually" does the ritual, if it isn't the PCs? Are the usual participants good at it, or not?

What is the underlying myth? Some parts are compulsory: the lead hero is probably named, the challenge they face is probably described. The rest, you're going to make up, and make up to fit your PCs. We'll deal with this later, but for now, think about that lead hero. What sort of challenges do they usually face? What abilities do they usually use to deal with them? What sort of problems are they unable to deal with, and need help with? (So after Humakt (and friends) healed the lion's paw, he (and friends) chose the correct path, persuaded half the enemy to be their allies, and then went on to the Big Fight....) Do they have a standard side-kick or foil? Of course, if this isn't a major deity, just a local hero, then this becomes more difficult to find out (and easier to make up!). Some of those "local heroes" appear in many places in "Dragon Pass", though, so check them out in the index. Also, look at cases where a "local hero" is doing a lower-level version of a more well-known myth.

Having looked at that: who would normally take those parts? You just listed some NPCs, and can start to work out how they fit into the local social structure.

What effects are there on life in the mundane? Is this the time for everyone else around to have a party? Possibly the entire clan does a purely mundane and simplified reenactment, too: a procession around a fixed route, perhaps. Lots of possibilities there, that's your standard "travelogue" plot.

Maybe the ritual itself is so easy it's trivial, the rewards are great, and there's a competition every year to see who gets the honour? Remember the Garhound Contest? Maybe, while this is normally true, every seven years the quest is much harder and the rewards are less. The locals know this, the PCs don't. So when they arrive to compete, the locals keep letting them win....

What's different from the norm?

That last idea can be expanded. So far we've looked at what's normal. Maybe something's different this time? That would help, because you probably don't want the PCs taking part to be or to become the norm.

The simplest and most obvious difference to introduce is that the Lunar occupiers don't want the ritual to succeed. So just getting the "normal" participants to the ritual, through it, and out again, may be a problem in itself, and one to be solved at the mundane level. Can your PCs find out about a sabotage attempt, and foil it?

Why might the PC get to take part this time? Maybe the Local Hero needs the best support he can get? Maybe the obvious usual hero is unavailable? Or needs a deputy? Maybe while he's a good match, he lacks some skills they can help with? The clan's best warrior is off to kill Aroka - but she's a Vingan, she can't seduce the Dark Woman. Delegate to PCs.

Possibly the opposition, mundane or magical, have changed tactics, assuming that they're acting of their own volition (cliffs and similar opponents don't often change tactics). Do our side know about that, or will it come as a surprise partway through the quest? If they know about it, or even suspect, they can take precautions (like calling for help from the PCs). If not, someone's going to have to improvise a response, part-way through a heroquest. Wouldn't it be nice if one of the PCs coincidentally had the right skills?

Maybe the opposition level is higher than usual - the usual Darkness representative is a trollkin, but someone's kindly supplied a demon from the Black Horse Troop instead.

Some local experimental soul has a Cunning Plan for doing the quest a better way, or getting extra results out of it - the traditionalists won't like that, probably only people who think like PCs will support them. I've even run one once where unknown to everyone else, the controlling priest was using the quest as a means of disposing of the lead character, while also stealing most of their magic....

Simply having the PCs present will be a change from the norm, we hope. How will the locals react to them? Are they strangers here to help in their time of need? Foreigners who we don't really trust? A lot will depend on who called them here, and how this "sponsor" is regarded. Maybe this is a homecoming, the wild adventurers called home to help. That gives you a whole range of responses, from the parent who still treats them as a kid to the younger sibling who hero-worships them, not to mention the people who think they're irresponsible teenagers with over-grown egos. Admiration, resentment, jealousy...? All the usual things when a group arrive in a new location and upset the existing social order simply by existing. If you can make any of this match the myth, the extra resonance will be great!

Fitting it together

Now, we have a lot of bits of jigsaw over on the Myth side of the table, and the PC bits over on their side. Time to choose which ones to use, and fit them together. I'll assume for now that you do want the PCs to go heroquesting - any of the other options fall into "standard scenario" territory.

What's compulsory? What do you know about the lead hero, the opposition, and the skills needed? You usually get told that much. If there are parts the PCs can't do, put an NPC in the slot and move on to the supporters. What assistants or sidekicks does the hero usually have in most known myths about them? Equipment, even - remember the Arming of Orlanth?

The match between PC and role does not have to be perfect. It can depend on abilities they didn't know they had. If the way of defeating the enemy is to beat him at a game of Triple-Gambit Fox & Geese using the clan's sacred gaming pieces, it's possible that one of the PCs may find an unexpected and highly specialist skill on their character sheet. At 13, but that's still better than 6 or 0. Maybe they pull out that relationship to Old Uncle Hrothgar - isn't it handy that the old man taught you to play the game?

Maybe that Named Item that you hadn't previously identified is the long-lost Sacred Widget that gives +20 to the chances of the quest succeeding? Beware, you may end up either giving up the item, or coming back here every year!

There can be times when a perfect match to the role is the last thing you want! Suppose a myth calls for Trickster to take part. No-one in their right mind wants a real genuine devotee of Eurmal in their ritual! So instead, you find someone who has the one ability Trickster is supposed to display here. Did anyone take "pull silly faces" or "burp tunes" as an ability?

What gets very interesting about this is that it isn't just the GM and players meta-gaming, picking characters and plot - so are the PCs and NPCs! Some of their decisions may be better than others. "Let's not do the Baths of Nelat, we'll all die"
"I'm not having any Humakti in this, I don't trust them"

"Yes, I know he's useless, but he's my cousin"

That helps you fill in some of the prejudices of the local decision-makers, fleshing out their character sheets.

Examples

Situations vary so much that it's hard to find something that will suit everyone, but here's a few possibilities to look at. First a couple of existing scenarios set around this sort of theme, then a look at how we can build our own.

The Garhound Contest

Yes, I know, that isn't from the Dragon Pass gazeteer – but it is a scenario built up around a local ritual, and a very good one, too.

Old Hare's Riddle

Another old classic scenario, this time from Tales of the Reaching Moon 7, by Jon Quaife. Here, what happens every year is that the Hare spirit visits Greydog village, and asks riddles – different riddles, but always the same answers. The ritual reaffirms the relationship between Hare spirit and village. But this time, the third answer is not the same, and someone will have to heroquest to find out the new answer, reenacting the first meeting between the clan founder and the Hare. The heroquest path is detailed here, and is generic enough that almost any group could follow it – some combat, some persuasion, some trickery. The examples given of the clan squabbles over who's to blame for what are great fun, and could provide several sessions of roleplaying in themselves if you felt that way inclined.

Broken Neck Hills

P16 of Dragon Pass. This apparently is where the young Orlanth and Yinkin used to race each other from their mother's hearth to play in the valley below, risking broken necks. Now there is an annual race between "holy men of Orlanth and Yinkin", and some of the participants do break their necks.

How are we going to fit the PCs into this? Well, are any of them Orlanthi? That was easy enough, wasn't it? You can probably work out how to give any Yinkini something to do, as well. And Kero Fin starts the race, warning them of the dangers – there's a spot for Earth worshippers to take part, though unless you have an actual worshipper of Kero Fin in the group, they'll just be supporting the main priestess.

But that's a bit simple, and probably leaves out half the party. How can we complicate it? Well, we have here a well-known ritual that's liable to leave "holy men of Orlanth" with broken necks. I wonder how the Lunars will feel about this? You know, I don't think they've banned this ritual at all... There are similar annual races in England, often chasing cheeses down hillsides, for less well-defined reasons. One recently turned out to be far more dangerous than usual, because heavy rain had made the hillside extremely slippery. Weather control sounds like a nice magical means of sabotage to me – and for once, we have Lunars trying to make Sartar wetter, against Orlanthi wishes! Hand the rest of the PCs a clue about the Lunar ritual, and any other sabotage that may be going on.

Of course, it isn't only Lunars who want to quietly remove prominent Orlanthi. Clans have been

known to feud with other clans... do the PCs have a rival, or an enemy, who might be taking part? This would be a great opportunity to get in there and trip them up, wouldn't it? Maybe one of their allies is in there: and so is someone else, who wants to get rid of the ally? The Earth priestesses can do damage, too: withholding blessings at the start, making the earth beneath their feet unfriendly. Oh, yes, lots of opportunities for foul play, for the PCs to take part in, or try to stop.

Crow Top

Not an annual ritual, this time, and based on more recent history. Bagdalch, the Spirit Crow, is imprisoned here. Making "certain offerings" frees him, and, accompanied by hordes of crows, he falls upon whatever victim the worshipper names. When Derreva the Clever did this in the Resettlement, it started the Corvid Wars.

This is one of those cases where you're going to want to look things up in the index to find out just what was going on here. Read the "Killard Vale" section, to start with. The Corvid Wars were complex, the reason Derreva had enemies isn't immediately obvious, and the aftereffects were long-lasting. I won't fill in all my deductions here, just point out that there's a lot to look at, and that it probably links in with modern Kheldon inter-clan politics. But as a general concept, anyone desperate enough can try to find out what the offerings should be, and send Bagdalch against their enemies. You won't be popular, but you can do it. What those offerings are, and how you go about finding out, is entirely up to you to decide. Asking Derreva would seem like a good move: she's buried at Wethersfield. Maybe some Sage or other will know more. When you know what sacrifices were used, how are you going to get them? (How did Derreva get them?) What talents do your party have? Use them. Or, if this sort of thing isn't their scene, invent an NPC who's trying to summon the Crow against her enemies, and have them realise what a bad idea that would be, and try to stop her. Did I mention Kheldon inter-clan politics? Kallyr's ancestors were on the Raven side of the Corvid wars....

Last Cast

Here the cult requirements are a bit more specific. Vinga and Urox fight chaos together, the opposition is known as the "friends-now-foes", and Vinga drives them away with a Last Cast – presumably of a javelin. If you have a Vingan or a Uroxi in your party, you can see how this is going to work out. Alternatively, take a look at the setting: this is a Vingan refuge for exiles that the Lunars have not yet found. Any turn-coat Sartarites who wanted to betray the location to the Lunars would count as friends-not-foes. Possibly the PC action here is to find out that the betrayal is going to be attempted, and to warn the defenders that the ritual will be needed.

Larnste's Table

Almost too many options here! Larnste raised it when he needed a place to rest his staff and gloves while he ate. These days, it seems that the Orlanthe hold "many rites" atop it, and the Cinsina clans hold annual celebrations and races here. "Lant Ulfar's head watches from the edge". Yes, this is another where you need to look up a few more entries to find out what was going on. Fortunately here the main story is in a box on the same page: Lant Unfar the giant is trying to trap Larnste, god of Motion, and Destor rescues him.

You could find a Destor PC, of course, and a giant to hit. You could also decide that those races are to do with the God of Motion. Larnste doesn't have many direct worshippers, so my guess would be that anyone with a connection to the Motion Rune can take part. Well, that's most of the party, then.... now go and look at my previous comments about racing down a steep hill. What Lant Ulfar

was trying to do was to remove Larnste's powers of motion by means of drumming. Someone who didn't like Orlanthi might want to try that again, and succeed this time. Enter a Lunar with a drum...

The Cold Caves

I'd originally said that you should start by looking at your PCs, and so far we've been starting at the other end. Let's look at some PCs, and then find a location myth to suit them. I don't think many people have the group of a morocanth, a duck, and an Agimori, not any more, but you do get the Humakti troll (adopted), the Yinkini, the skald, the Kolating and the Desemborthi thief.¹ So we take a quick look through sites everywhere to find something to suit. There seem to be quite a lot dedicated to Yinkin. We already know about Catnip Hill, where the Bad Dog stole Yinkin's heat, but what's rather more use are the Cold Caves nearby, where Orlanth followed those Bad Dogs into the Underworld, and stole the heat back again. Orlanth in Thief mode is also known as Desemborth, so that's one part sorted. He found his way into the Underworld by persuading the troll who guarded the entrance to Wonderhome to let him in, then put the Bad Dogs to sleep by sending a sweet lullaby on the winds. Perfect! Fits our PCs in every possible way. We don't know how often this is done, but with a range of characters like that required, it can't be often, or if it is, it's done badly most times, with not much of a "fit" between the part in the myth and the NPC taking it. The PCs will be very welcome. Normally it probably isn't very important, but obtaining heat is going to be a very useful trick when the Fimbulwinter comes along. That's a way in the future for this particular party, but I can see them being called back to help, when it happens.

There's only one slight catch: those of you who are alert are reading Dragon Pass trying to find the Cold Caves, aren't you? Stop looking. I made them up. I borrowed a bit of myth from here, a bit from there (the lullaby on the breeze is in the Sambari Pass, their home tribe), and invented the lot, in the spirit of the myths in the book, but no more. *And there is nothing whatsoever stopping you from doing the same thing.* Dragon Pass mythlets give inspiration, no more. All you get is a two-line mythlet: and there's nothing to stop you from inventing those two lines, as well as all the rest.

¹ This is a genuine PC party, in a game run by a friend.