

KING AND COUNTRY



Character Nationality as Background

By Mark A. Hart

Conan the Cimmerian. Ned Stark of Winterfell. Elric of Melniboné. Characters such as these draw many of their traits, attitudes, and beliefs from their birthplace.

The fifth-edition rules introduce *background* as part of character creation. Most of the available backgrounds focus on previous vocations or lifestyles, such as acolyte or soldier. Another possibility, however, is for their nationality, whether by birth or by choice, to describe their skills and upbringing.

Using nationality as background serves the player, the GM, and the campaign setting. It helps tell a character's story, but it also estab-

lishes underlying themes for different kingdoms and locales. Put another way, the world defines the character even as the character defines the world.

Consider two different barbarians. One hails from the savage, frozen land of Cimmeria, while the other grew up in the marshes of Stygia, a realm of witches, sinister magic, and lurking horrors. Both characters belong to the same character class and both gain strength from their inner rage, but their upbringing has affected the way they approach the world. The Cimmerian often solves problems through brute force, while the Stygian barbarian must rely on stealth and agility to survive.

The GM and her players may wish to create nationality backgrounds tailored for their campaign world. A good place to start involves describing nations in broad fantasy themes, such as “Territory of the Horse Lords” or “Accursed Realm.” This proves especially helpful for players unfamiliar with the setting; if a player doesn’t know the difference between Rohan and Angmar, she may find it difficult to make an informed character background choice.

List of Nationality Backgrounds

The following list provides fourteen nationality backgrounds based on common fantasy tropes. Each background offers several parenthetical examples, drawn from literary fantasy and from history, to illustrate the overall theme. In some cases, a nation may fall into more than one category: Melniboné could be described as both an Arcane Dominion and a Fading Empire. Use whichever choice feels most appropriate for the character.

With some imagination and brainstorming, the GM and her players can create many other backgrounds to add to the list.

Accursed Realm. A dark, haunted land of supernatural evil or ancient curse (Angmar, Stygia, The Blight, The Dry Land).

Arcane Dominion. A domain ruled by arcane spellcasters (Acheron, Melniboné).

Besieged Bastion. A nation trapped in a state of war against a powerful enemy (Gondor, Saldaea, Shienar, The Wall).

Confederacy of Feuding Houses. A collection of loosely allied noble houses or city-states, riven by feuds, factions, and convoluted plots (Murandy, Republic of Florence).

Crusader Nation. A realm of shining knights and powerful priests driven to destroy evil (Amadicia, Aquilonia, Gondor, Camelot).

Domain of the Reavers. A land widely feared for its unstoppable marauders (Iron Islands, Umbar, Vikings).

Fading Empire. A once-great domain receding into its twilight years (Acheron, Melniboné, Videssos, the Old Republic).

Lost Civilization. A legendary land destroyed or forever hidden from the outside world (Atlantis, Lemuria, Skartaris).

Maritime Power. A seafaring (or airfaring) nation protected by a powerful navy and the best ship captains in the world (Braavos, Helium of Barsoom, Queg).

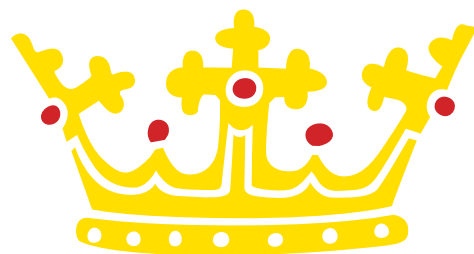
Pirate Concordance. A loose conglomeration of pirates, rogues, and scoundrels united against a common foe (Barachan Islands, Port Royal, Sanctuary, Tortuga).

Regime of the Dark Overlord. A ruthless and ambitious empire dominated by a powerful evil or supernatural force (Annuvin, Charn, Mordor).

Savage Land. A brutal, unforgiving realm where only the strong survive, and where cruel gods hold sway (Aiel Wastes, Cimmeria, Cold Waste, Land Beyond the Wall).

Territory of the Horse Lords. A land famed for its horses and the skilled warriors who ride them (Dothraki Sea, Fleeds, Rohan).

Trader Nation. A wealthy, mercantile republic where commerce is everything and gold is king (Argos, Ilian, Kingdom of Kandor, Lysle, Tyrosh).



Establishing Background from Theme

To develop a nationality background, start with one of the themes described above. Next, decide how that theme translates into game concepts.

Proficiencies. Which skill and tool proficiencies seem most appropriate for a character from a specific realm? People living in a wilderness region focus on physical and survival skills, such as Animal Handling, Athletics, Stealth, and Survival. Individuals from a more civilized land favor trade and knowledge skills like Investigation, Medicine, Persuasion, and Performance, as well as different languages. Characters from a realm steeped in magic and suspicion may emphasize skills such as Arcana, Insight, History, and Religion. Choose any combination of four skill, tool, or language proficiencies when creating a background in this way.

Equipment. What equipment makes the most sense for a character from this land to possess? A character from a Lost Civilization may carry strange items impossible to find elsewhere, such as exotic clothing, a dagger forged from alien metal, or a good luck charm discovered on a crashed sky ship. A character from the Territory of the Horse Lords carries trinkets and tools related to horses and horseback riding.

Feature. What connections and networks did the character belong to in her homeland? What benefits could these networks provide? If the character lived in a city ruled by thieves, she probably knows what to say and do to gain audience with the local thieves' guild. If the character belonged to an arcane aristocracy, she can request favors from wizards and sorcerers wherever she travels, but she must repay those favors. The best-designed features have no mechanical benefits, but can help a character in roleplaying scenarios.

Personality Trait, Ideal, Bond, and Flaw. To create these elements, imagine the prevalent beliefs, hopes, and fears of people in the kingdom. For example, the realm of Mordor casts a long shadow over the people of Gondor—its presence colors every facet of their lives. The citizens of such a Besieged Bastion live each day burdened with the knowledge that everything they care about faces extinction. A character's traits, ideals, and so forth may revolve around escaping their impending doom or finding a way to save his homeland. Nationality can also affect how other people view a character; people may treat a Viking as nothing more than a dangerous brute, even if they won't admit it to her face.

Nationality Background Examples

The following examples more fully develop two of the nationality background themes: Crusader Kingdom and Arcane Dominion.

Crusader Nation

You grew up a citizen of the greatest kingdom in the land, a realm that served as an example of civilization and stability in a dark, lawless world. Unfortunately, your homeland faces many enemies both within and without—enemies that seek the destruction of everything your nation represents. You have dedicated your life to one of the many holy orders protecting the kingdom. Your order boasts agents, allies, and stalwarts across the world, even in the world's darkest, most dangerous corners.

Skill Proficiencies: Intimidation, Religion

Tool Proficiencies: Artisan's tools (armorer's kit), vehicles (land)

Equipment: An insignia of your order, a tabard with your order's symbol, a set of traveler's clothes, a letter of introduction signed by your superior, and a belt pouch containing 15 gp

Feature: Friend of the Order

Your order maintains a network of spies, agents, and supporters. Your kingdom has friends, even in places dominated by evil. When necessary, you know how to locate safe havens in otherwise dangerous places, and you know which individuals to contact for shelter, food, sanctuary, and basic healing.

Suggested Characteristics

The citizens of this kingdom understand the need for perpetual vigilance, especially in the face of so many enemies. You understand the importance of loyalty to your order, to your kingdom, and to your beliefs; beliefs for which you would sacrifice everything you own.



Crusader Nation Characteristics

d4	Personality Trait
1	I have trouble trusting outsiders.
2	The world is beyond the help of normal men—but I am no normal man!
3	I see the corrupting touch of evil everywhere I look.
4	I seek to bring justice to those who deserve it.
d4	Ideal
1	Loyalty. I stand beside my companions and allies, regardless the cost. (Lawful)
2	Honor. I defend the honor of my order and my kingdom, for without honor we are nothing. (Good)
3	Protection. I promise to safeguard those who cannot defend themselves. (Good)
4	Vengeance. Those who wrong me deserve whatever retribution I deliver unto them. (Evil)
d4	Bond
1	My order means everything to me, and I'll die before I dishonor it.
2	I serve my kingdom above all, regardless of my own needs and desires.
3	I owe my life to the priest who saved me, and I have pledged my soul in service of his order.
4	No matter how long it takes, I must atone for the sins and failures of my past.
d4	Flaw
1	When I see an evil act, I feel compelled to intervene.
2	I cannot lie; falsehood is the first step towards damnation, even when it is for a noble cause.
3	I hold myself responsible for the misdeeds of my friends and allies.
4	I give my trust and loyalty too easily, often to the wrong people.



Arcane Dominion

You lived in the most magically advanced nation to ever exist. You grew up surrounded by magic as an everyday occurrence, and thus you lack the superstitious dread that most people experience in the presence of the supernatural. Wherever you travel, no matter whom you encounter, you do so with the knowledge of your culture's innate superiority.

Skill Proficiencies: Arcana, Investigation

Languages: Two of your choice

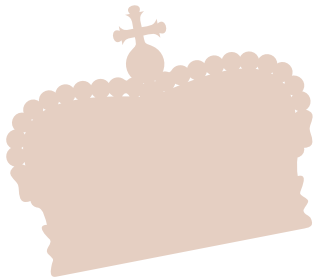
Equipment: A set of fine clothes, a vial of black ink, a quill, traveling journal, dagger, copy of your favorite book, and a belt pouch containing 15 gp

Feature: Network of Knowledge

Whether you possess arcane talents or not, your nationality provides you with professional cachet among wizards and other arcane spellcasters. You can request favors from these individuals, such as advice on magical problems, research concerning magic items and relics, and translation of sigils or runes. If you ask a favor, however, you must repay it in a reasonable time or risk alienating your peers.

Suggested Characteristics

Growing up in an Arcane Dominion formed many of your attitudes towards magic and spellcasters, as well as your opinions regarding people without magical ability. If you possessed arcane talent, you enjoyed the good life as one of your nation's most valued citizens. Thanks to your upbringing, you find magic familiar and even comforting, and pity those who fear magic or refuse to benefit from its use.



Arcane Dominion Characteristics

d4	Personality Trait
1	I belong to the most advanced nation in the world, and so I must represent my people in the best possible light.
2	I feel comfortable around magic, and I feel anxious anywhere magic is unwelcome.
3	I travel and explore the world to avoid becoming complacent.
4	I yearn for novel experiences and discoveries, especially since I become bored so easily.
d4	Ideal
1	Knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge is the noblest pursuit. (Any)
2	Discovery. I will do anything to uncover lost magical secrets. (Chaotic)
3	Mastery. I must become the most powerful arcanist in the world. (Neutral)
4	Hope. Doom threatens this world, and only magic can save us from it. (Good)
d4	Bond
1	I betrayed my master for knowledge, and I must atone for what I've done.
2	Thanks to a youthful indiscretion, I fell under an ancient curse and now must find a way to remove it.
3	My memories have been lost to me, and something tells me my life depends on getting them back.
4	My family must recover the lost arcane secrets of our ancestors before our enemies do.
d4	Flaw
1	I don't make mistakes, even when I do.
2	I never met a book I could resist reading.
3	Magic has its price, and I'm willing to pay it—or let someone else pay.
4	I look down on those who lack the talent for magic.

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