

The Mountains of Malathia

The Pirate King's Fief
The edge of civilisation at the centre of the world



Welcome to the mountainous land of Malathia, ruled by King Charles; called by some the Pirate King. In truth, there are no more pirates in Malathia than in any other land; well perhaps a few more than in Fidelia, but since men are not even allowed to count for themselves in Fidelia that is hardly surprising. The truth is that Malathia builds the finest sailing vessels in the Known World and our sailors are worth two of any other nation. There are no more pirates in Malathia than anywhere else; it's just that our pirates are much better than those of other lands. When a Malathian vessel appears on the horizon, then pile on all the extra sail you have, for only the luck of the Gods will keep you from being overhauled.

A Brief History

Malathia is a nation positioned almost at the heart of the Known World. If you sail west from Malathia you pass the lands of the Kamakura and then beyond you reach the endless sea. To the east the Golean Sea separates us from the Theocracy of Fidelia and wealthy Flambard. If you sail south through the Mallin Straits you pass the prosperous lands of the Rukhi and the industrious nation of Amun'Sa, before you reach the Free Islands and the Maelstrom. To the north lie the icy waters of the Divine Ocean through which rich ships of every land travel. Malathia is surrounded by wealthy and powerful nations on every side.

But Malathia itself is not a rich nation. It has wealth, but not nearly enough to support a nation of its relative power. The great mountain ranges which run the length of the land contain no great deposits of gold or silver, and the land is infertile and inhospitable. So barren is the land that it is often said that the Malathians live here because no one else wants the place. The hard climate breeds hard men though, more than a match for the warlike bushi in battle, or the fearsome Yugorskian paladins. These men know every path and valley through the mountains and they are adept at turning the terrain to their advantage. Neither a shogun nor a Hierophant has ever succeeded in driving the clans from the highlands for long, though several have tried many times.

According to legends, the clans who now make Malathia their home fled to this place during the time when the Renian Empire was expanding. Driven to the frontier of the Empire, they found the mountains so defensible that the land was never conquered and formed a border, past which the Renian Empire could not travel. Each clan claimed a section of the lands for themselves and for the most part they ruled themselves, but they chose a king so that they would have a figure to unite behind when attacked. Here they continued the lifestyles they had always led, raiding cattle and sheep from each other, with occasional skirmishes between clans, but little

more. Life in the arid highlands is too harsh for men to engage in unwarranted battle.

Those clans whose lands included a natural harbour or inlet took advantage of the relatively rich bounty of the sea to supplement the traditional Malathian diet of meat and stock. They soon began to build fishing vessels and from there the tradition of clan vessels began. To this day, most of the clans maintain at least a couple of seaworthy vessels, although not all are fishing smacks. When Malathians discovered that the sea had other bounty to offer up, more precious than fish, many of them began to build bigger, faster ships. Thus the clan traditions of raiding were taken on to the seas and those with the courage for it prospered as they honed their skills.

The Malathian Clans

In modern Malathia there are very much two types of clansmen. Those who live in the highlands still cling to the old traditions, wearing full kilts woven in traditional clan colours. The great swords that their barbaric forebears used have long since vanished in favour of the more practical basket-hilted swords favoured by the seafarers. Most carry a buckler if battle is imminent; for conflict in the highlands is usually more a matter of skirmishes and duels than a clash of armies. Few highlanders see any reason to go unarmed in any circumstance and asking a highlander to remove his sword is considered impolite. They stick to the traditional practices of the highland clans, raising herds of cattle and sheep which they drive to the towns and markets to sell. Most clans keep a still in which they distil strong liquor to a traditional clan recipe from whatever grain or roots grow in the area. The highland clans take pride in their hospitality and anyone who doesn't talk with a Fidelean accent is guaranteed a warm welcome.

Every prominent town and city in Malathia is built on the coast and it is here that the seafarers live. They are from the same stock as their highland cousins and a few still wear the kilt and keep the older customs, but most consider themselves something of a cut above the more provincial highland clans.

How unified the clans of Malathia actually are, is a difficult question to answer. In the towns and cities of modern Malathia, the rule of the king is absolute, and his soldiers and bondsmen patrol the waterfronts keeping the peace and collecting taxes. But in the highlands, away from the capital of Nordon, many clans retain a fiercely independent streak and see nothing wrong with operating smuggling and pirate vessels from hidden coves and harbours. It would be a mistake to misjudge their independence for disloyalty, however. The overwhelming majority of the clans are fiercely supportive of their king, just not his taxes and his soldiers. Those who have sought to conquer the highlands from another land soon discover that the Malathian clans will have no one but their king.

When the nation has need, the king can issue a call to the clans of the highlands and it is rare that they do not respond. Perhaps, in part, this loyalty stems from the knowledge that, without the protection of the king, the people of Malathia would be forced to face the wrath of nations like Fidelia and Kamakura alone. King Charles owes his heritage and upbringing to the remote highlands; however he is no fool and is aware of the precarious balance that Malathia must maintain. Currently, no Malathian ship is allowed to sail in the waters of another nation, the Kamakura and Rukh threaten the land borders, Fidelia refers to the country as an impious nation of heretics, and Flambard is always looking for new military targets. Even with the clans united behind the king, the Malathians have not the force to repulse a major invasion by any one of their enemies, and the situation would be disastrous if they turned against him.

The most effective weapon that the King has is to issue Letters of Marque against all ships in enemy waters. The devastating effect this has upon enemy trade has proved a terribly effective weapon in the past but it must be used with great care. It is for this reason that no other nation will allow a Malathian ship in its waters, but it is also due to the effectiveness of this strategy that Malathia retains its independence today.

Places and peoples of note

The capital of Malathia, Nordon, is the busiest seaport in the Known World. Successive kings have made the place a merchants' haven, so that Malathia has grown into a centre of trade. The position of Nordon as the only substantial port for hundreds of miles means that it effectively controls the most viable sea routes through the Mallin Straits. It has prospered from the trade in goods from Rukh and Kamakura that are forced to pass through the straits. As a result, the Kamakuran currency has come to dominate throughout Malathia.

Beyond Nordon there is the port of Sark and then innumerable privately owned docks and clan owned shipyards that stretch all the way up the coastline. Malathia itself consists of grassy hills and lowlands on the southeast, stretching up to granite mountains and highland in the northwest. The northwest coast is a famously treacherous lea shore, although it is not known what proportion of ships wrecked along the rocks there are solely due to inclement weather of the Golean Sea.

The King himself lives in a well-appointed palace located in the centre of Nordon, although he is known to prefer to spend the winter at his ancestral castle deep in the highlands. His advisers are a mixture of hand-picked notables and representatives from the most powerful of the Malathian clans. The clan council wields considerable power in Malathia and effectively prevents

the King from exercising direct rule over much more than his ancestral lands and the lowlands surrounding Nordon. Although the clan council limits the powers of the King, it also helps ensure the loyalty of the clans when the King most needs their aid. Still, it is the very autonomy of the clans that has led to the invasion of the country on several occasions as actions of one or more has finally driven a neighbouring power to invade.

The largest clan is the Vincents, a lowland clan from near Nordon; this clan is extremely outward looking and has a great deal of contacts amongst other nations, notably Flambard. This clan is renowned to be harbouring several fleeing royalists from Mill'en. The McTains are a highland clan living in the mountain lands near the Kamakuran border in a well-built granite fortress. They have grown wealthy from raids on the Kamakura lands although the Kamakurans have recently increased the strength of troops on the border. Castle McTain has never fallen to a besieging army, although the most recent attack by the Shogun's troops burnt several villages owned by the clan in order to try to cripple them. This clan is strongly devoted to worship of the Smith.

Clan McNash specialises in the use of darkpowder weaponry and although they have been rather hostile in cattle raids on their neighbouring clans, they proudly claim that it is the strength of their clan that has deterred any recent incursions from Fidelia. The Fitzwarrens have traditionally been one of the wealthier and more powerful clans, but a series of disastrous decisions has reduced the size of their fleets and their fortunes have dwindled with it. Rumour has it that they have invested much of their remaining wealth in an expedition which has been sent to the New World with King Charles' blessing.

Malathian Piracy

Many Malathians are untroubled by the bellicose speeches of the Hierophant or the impassioned demands of the Shogun for the cessation of piracy. The old clan traditions dictate that a man has no need of any more cattle or wealth than he can personally protect. In the highlands, a clan that cannot protect their cattle or their sheep has no right to feel cheated when another clan relieve them of a few. The same spirit endures today in those Malathians who have taken to the sea as buccaneers and pirates.

Though the Hierophant may portray the Malathians as bloodthirsty murderous thieves, the truth is a little more sober. It is damn near impossible to sink a ship without leaving a survivor and the pirates of other lands that make a practice of it quickly earn a name for themselves. Such ships soon discover that the crew of every vessel they overtake will fight to the death when given no alternative and many captains will cheerfully scuttle their own ship if they know their lives are forfeit. The Malathian approach (to overhaul a ship, demand their surrender and take what goods and wealth can easily be carried away, but leave them their ship and crew to sail on) fits with what many Malathians would see as a fair and honourable exchange. The fact that it tends to be the most effective way to conduct piracy is supposedly a lesser concern.

Technically, piracy is illegal in Malathia. So is smuggling, supplying darkpowder weapons to the Free Islands, and selling ships to unlicensed captains. Most Malathian pirates and smugglers accept the illegality of what they do with the same

calm demeanour that they ply their trade. The fact that Malathia is one of only two nations in the Known World where neither piracy nor smuggling carries the death penalty may have something to do with their calm acceptance of the risks. Malathians caught engaging in piracy or smuggling by the king's soldiers are fined heavily and their goods confiscated, but there is little sense of moral outrage on either side. The Malathian tradition of holding nothing more than you can protect appears to cover what the king removes as much as it does what any other clan carries off.

Of course, other lands take a less accepting view of the dangers posed by Malathian captains, and pirates caught in their waters can expect to hang as soon as they reach port.

Current Politics

In general, it is no secret that Malathia cannot afford a colony. Rumours are widespread as to where King Charles is getting the gold to fund this, but the consensus of opinion is that he will be selling letters of marque to various independent privateers. Of course the King will not be doing this personally; he will likely leave the actual dirty work of dealing with pirate captains to his chancellor, Morgan.

If this is indeed the strategy then it is a dangerous one. If it succeeds then the colony will prosper, but it will take some impressive diplomacy to keep the other nations from overreacting to attacks on their shipping. Many nations are already keen to see the Malathians denied a foothold in the New World and will be looking for any excuse to attack. Given the large number of pirates and freebooters sailing to the New World from the Free Islands it is difficult to see how they will not have numerous crimes to pin on the Malathians if they choose. With King Charles in no position to provide military or naval support, the survival of the colony will depend on the diplomatic skills of its leaders.

The recent revolution in Mill'en and the opening of the gap into the Maelstrom has shifted the attention of the Hierophant, who seems fixated on the Maelstrom, which should prevent the Fidelians from launching further crusades against Malathia. With this respite from external military pressure, some of the clans have escalated raiding against the bordering Kamakuran and Rukhi settlements. The King is trying to divert most of these independently active clans with promises of much greater reward in the new colonies. Should this fail then the highland clans are once again likely to escalate the situation to a point where an assault from the Shogun or another crusade from Fidelia becomes inevitable.

A longstanding rivalry has existed for many years between the nations of Malathia and Flambard. Whilst Flambard's military aspirations have always been primarily focussed on the prowess of their army and Malathia more concerned with its shipping, the two have rarely had much reason for direct confrontation. When King Charles ascended the throne, he made several attempts to create a diplomatic alliance between the two nations, in the hope of agreeing a common policy on the growing threat represented by the nation of Gerosos. All diplomatic overtures were publicly denounced by Flambard, leading to some considerable embarrassment for the new king. As a result he nurtures an implacable dislike for the Flembic people to this day.

