

Arthur, King of

A Strategic Review of *Britannia*

by

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Thank you, Tom Shaw and all the boys at The Avalon Hill Game Company, for *Britannia*. After years of dreadful *Squad Leader* and *Advanced Squad Leader* and other games whose play often felt like drudgery, you have returned to your early days and produced an enjoyable, challenging, fast-playing and original game. As someone who has played your games for twenty years, and even had a design published by you, I feel proud to say the this game fully deserves the AH logo.

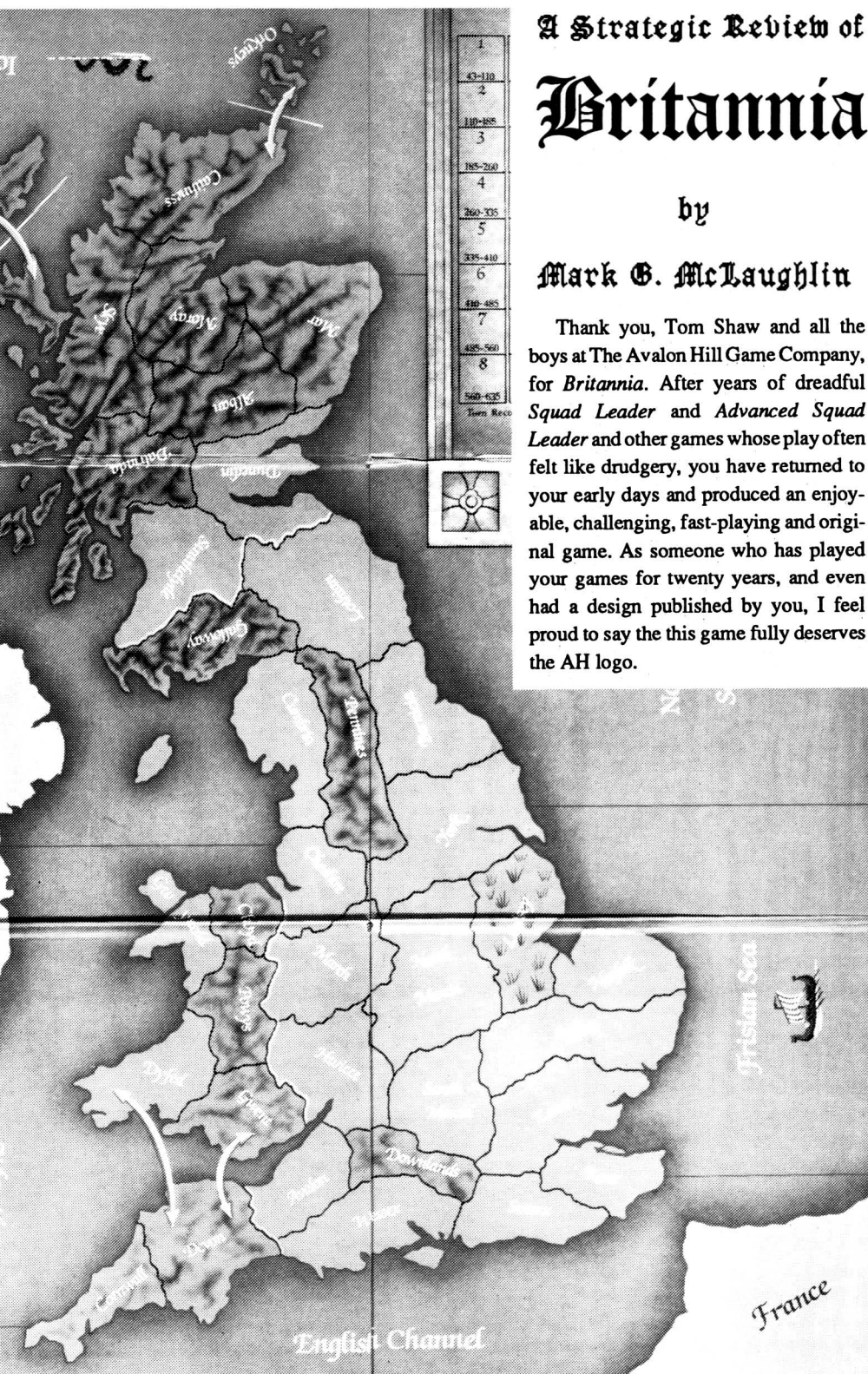
Britannia, to my mind, is the best thing to come out of Baltimore since the *Orioles*. It is, at least, the most inventive. In this multi-player game, you control the sweeping movements of nearly a score of tribes, nations and armies across a thousand years of history. Not many games give you such a grand canvas to paint on, or so many different brushes.

Britannia is a game for three, four or five, but plays at its best as a four-player game. Each player will control four or five nations that will enter into (or disappear from) play at varying points in the game. Each player has some quiet, long-living nations whose primary value is to give you a slow, steady growth of points and a reason for sitting at the table until the other nations in your hand come into play. These "other" nations are the mighty invaders who sweep in, burn and kill, and are often swept back, but who give you lots of points and lots of fun. The whole game is structured in such a way so that it is a constantly flowing game, with each player acting both as high tide and ebb tide at different times.

THE ROMAN PEACE

The four-player game consists of four colors: Red, Blue, Green and Purple. The Purple, appropriately enough, first appears as the Romans.

The game starts out with a nice, peaceful little Britain wherein reside the Belgae and Picts (Blue player), the Brigantes (Red player) and the Welsh and Caledonians (Green player). Into this nicely divided up country comes the onrush of the Roman Legions. This is not Julius Caesar's brief little in-and-out, this is Claudius's boys come to stay. Turn one, 43 AD, begins with a double move (heretofore called *Major Invasion*) by the



Who?



Romans. By the end of the turn, with any luck, the Blue player will be reduced to being the Picts, or at best he might have a Belgae or two hiding in the east coast swamps at Lindsay.

The Romans not only have bigger, better and faster armies than these local boys, but the Romans automatically, immediately and free of charge build forts wherever they go. A fort is just like another army, except that, being made of stone and wood, it does not move. If you loved turn one as the Romans, turn two should be ecstasy.

After the Romans finish turn one, each of the other nations, one at a time, gets slowly to build their population and launch maybe one attack. The non-Romans should avoid fighting Roman armies, and pick on some Roman who is out all alone, with a fort, or even better, a fort by itself. The non-Romans cannot afford to denude their lands of troops, as they need to hold land in order to get more troops.

The Belgae (Blue) who somehow survived turn one will surely be gone by turn two. The Brigantes (Red) in the north, or the Welsh (Green) in the west, will be next. The Romans get more points by going north, and the Brigantes are easier to kill, as most of their land is clear terrain. The Romans cannot ignore the Welsh, however, because of their numbers and long border, which gives the Romans too many places to defend effectively. This then is the first strategic decision the Roman has to make, and he can do this with some diplomacy, or by force.

Although this is a simple game where players have nothing tangible to trade, diplomacy is possible. A Roman may, for example, offer the Welsh the inviolability of Wales, which gives both players benefits. For the Romans, it keeps Western

England a Latin speaking haven and lets the Romans march north. A Welsh player should jump at this, because even though it means he will not make any points early, it does mean that the Romans will march north, and the Welsh can build up for the long term. The same holds true for the Brigantes, but the temptation to get three points for each Roman fort they can burn will probably mitigate against peace, for both of them.

During this time the other fringe nations, the Caledonians (Green) and Picts (Blue), might make one or two attacks against each other, and the Picts might even attack the Brigantes, but not much will probably go on, as these nations need the time to build up their populations. These are, after all, the quiet, long-term point-makers referred to earlier in the article.

By turn three, the Romans will have just about shot their bolt. If they have not, the Welsh or Brigantes player whom they have picked as their target can keep himself in the game by submitting to Roman rule. It is painful but only lasts until turn six, and its beats the alternative.

On turn three the Red player gets his first ray of hope, the appearance of an Irish raiding army. It is best kept at sea, as one army is almost worthless.

THE LAST ROMAN SURGE

On turns four and five the Romans get some reinforcements from across the English channel, but these are not going to have much time to go on the offensive, as in come more Irish (Red), the Saxons (Red), a Scot (Purple), the Angles (Blue) and some more Picts (Blue). The Scot, who like the Romans is a purple-piece, should sit out at sea until more of his friends can come in. The Romans, on the other hand, should find some places to

bunker down to await the onrush. Good places are the areas of most point value, notably York, Essex and Cheshire. It is not worth trying to hold much more, as the rest of it will probably start burning, as the Green, Red and Blue boys coming in from the sea get back at you for what the Romans did to them.

The Romans are still, man for man, the most powerful of the armies on the board, however, and the invaders need to be careful, especially the Pict (Blue) and Saxon (Red), as these nations will be around for the rest of the game, that is if the owning-player is smart. As for the Jutes (Green) and the rest, you might as well wade in and get what points you can, when you can.

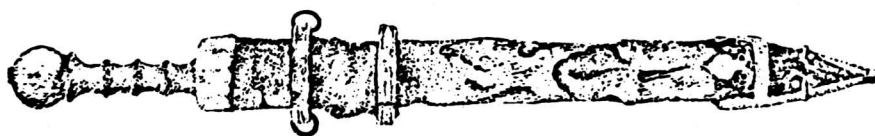
ARTHUR, KING OF THE WHO?

At the start of turn six the Romans "leave" Britain. All the Roman forts disappear, the Roman legions are replaced one on one for the Romano-British (also Purple), but as there are only eight of them to place, any legions in excess of eight are simply lost. Still, this does not mean the Romans should go on a do-or-die rampage on turn five, as they still have to weather the storm of raiders to get their points.

As turn six starts, the Purple player is now just one of the boys, with no special advantages. The Romano-British are a transition force, which can only get points on turns six and seven. There are two ways to play the Romano-British: first, you can go all out and kill other people. I suggest if you do, pick the Saxons, as they are about to become the dominant force in the game. After all, eight Saxons and a leader hit the beach on turn six, and if the Purple player misplays his turn, he will not be around for turn seven.

The second way to play is to ally





yourself firmly with either the Saxons or the Angles, in which case you divvy up the island so you can all get points on turn seven for occupying parts of the country. The benefit of this pacific strategy is not only that it maximizes points for all concerned, but that it allows everybody a chance to grow in numbers. This also gives the Purple player a powerful base for the King Arthur figure and his two cavalry armies.

Purple also gets a major invasion with the Scots on turn seven, and by moving the Romano-British northwestward, the Purple player can put the Picts (Blue) and Brigantes (Red) in a squeeze while the Saxons rape and pillage the south, and still keep away from the Angles, whose eight new armies come in for Blue this turn. The Angles are the natural enemies of the Saxons (Red), and Purple is best to keep out of the way. The Scots can gain a lot of points for Purple in Scotland (what a coincidence) while the Romano-British can still get some points for Purple.

WHAT'S A BRETWALDA AND WHY DO YOU WANT THE JOB?

Turn eight is a curious turn. The Romano-British cavalry, if still alive (which is rare), becomes normal infantry armies. The Romano-British also can never, get points for doing anything other than killing Angles, Saxons and Jutes. If by any chance Purple has some Romano-British left, he can either kill a few southerners for points, or he can build a little haven for himself and keep growing. After all, there will always be Saxons, and most likely, Angles, to kill, at any time. So why waste the last offensive people you get in England for a while on a heady ride to glory? Survival is a better plan, if the rest of them let you.

A good player who is about to go

under can make alliances not only to attack others but to vote for another player in the elections that start on turn nine. The winner of the election for Bretwalda (or high king), only gets two points, but that is about what you would get for killing two armies, and you might lose an army or two yourself in the bargain. Of course, if a player is already steamrolling, he will take the lands for himself, but the mid-game rarely allows *one* player to overawe the others.

The Welsh (Green) have a strong incentive to burst out of Wales and hit York for a quick six points. They do not even need to hold it, just grab it at any time on turn eight or nine. Green not only should prepare for this stroke, but everybody else better get set either to stop it or get out of the way, depending on how strong the Welsh are.

Turn nine and ten are relatively stable turns, where players only have what they have to work with. No major invasions are scheduled for that time period (653-785 AD). Also, everybody gets points at the end of turn ten.

THE VIKINGS ARE COMING! THE VIKINGS ARE COMING!

The peaceful fratricide of England bursts apart on turn eleven as eight Danish (Green) and six Norsemen (Red) ride the waves of rape and loot. For the Green player, this is the start of his last big hurrah. On turn eleven they can only raid, which means they hit and go back to sea, and pick up points in the meantime. The Danish player should not worry about killing people or getting the maximum points in the raid, but should go for a few safe bets where losses are minimized. There are more Danes coming later, and a "fleet in being" so to speak will give the next wave all that more punch.

The Norsemen are Red's flank attack

against the Blue or Green forces that are hurting his Saxons the worst. They can also gain Red a *lot* of points by hitting Northern targets and, one should not forget, Wales. They are spoilers, but can be great point earners throughout the next few turns.

Turn twelve is the Danish invasion. Six new Danes and a leader add to whatever is left of the last turn's Raiders, and they get the double-move of the Major Invasion, complete with a combat round after every move, to establish a Danish Empire. Again, the Danes have to play for the long term, as there are still more Danes to come. A good target for the Danes is the Saxons (Red), which the two major Green forces (Welsh and Danes) can hit from two sides in a one-two punch. Half of England is not called the "Danelaw" for nothing, and this invasion gives the Danish player a chance to recreate that, if he doesn't get too greedy all at once.

At this time, Blue (as the Picts) will be busy fighting off Red's Norse and the tiny influx of Purple's Dubliners. Blue's other main force, the Angles, will probably die at Danish hands, although an Angle "bunker" can be formed around Galloway and the Pennines, the two rough or "highland" areas in northern England. Two strong armies in those areas will scare away the Danes, who can get so much more by going against the easier to kill southern Saxons.

Purple is usually pretty much out of it by this time, but has two later invasions still to come, so hang in there with whatever you can.

THE BRIEF AND CURIOUS VISIT OF THE DUBLINERS TO ENGLAND

Turn thirteen is hell for the Saxons, because the Danes, unless they blew





themselves away, will still be coming on strong. The Saxons, like the Angles, need allies and a "bunker," perhaps in Devon, Cornwall and the Downlands, all of which are highland areas in the south and southwest. If they can get the Picts (Blue), Angles (Blue) and the incoming Purple mini-invasion of the Dubliners to act together, however, these three Davids can beat back the Dano-Welsh Goliath, to their mutual benefit.

Purple's Dubliners, who seem to arrive just in time to die, are good for a spoiling attack on Northern England, and can even cut their way into York, if lucky, or they can go for Wales, which is not a bad idea, as once they get on the ground in Wales they can stay there for a while, as nobody new comes to Wales for the rest of the game. A long-term thinking Purple player should consider a few turns of slow profit in Wales rather than a one-shot deal in the North. If you look at the reinforcement track, which shows a new influx of six Danes arriving on turn fourteen, in the Frisian Sea, you can bet that if the Dubliners screwed Green's Danes, the Danes will repay the favor. This, of course, would be welcomed by the Red Saxons, who might even encourage such a war.

Turn fourteen really is the Danes', and Green's, last hurrah, because at the end of the turn he has to withdraw four of his armies. If the Danes are still strong at the end of that, then Green should plan a long-term strategy to keep in the game until the end. If not, Green should get greedy and take this last shot for all it is worth, and for all he can grab, namely, the kingship.

ALL HAIL THE KING

Starting on turn twelve, instead of a Bretwalda the players in the English part of the map can vote on a King. This is worth four points and a free army that gets

placed before anybody moves. It is the most worthwhile thing you can get, in terms of points and troops, and it is something that both the Saxons and the Danes need to get. Blue, with his Angles and Picts etc, can like Purple with the Dubliners, act as the kingmakers in this dispute. The bottom line, of course, is to check who is ahead on points, but players need to remember that Blue and Purple each get one more shot for the big point score after the Danes hit their peak on turn fourteen. Diplomacy actually rears its head at this point of the late game.

WILL THERE EVER BE AN IVANHOE?

The last two turns of the game, turns fifteen and sixteen, will be a bloody two or three way struggle for the last *big* points of the game.

Either Green (Dano-Welsh) or Red (Saxons) will be the King of England at the start of turn fifteen. If there is *no* king, then neither Red or Green will have much of a chance to get any points, let alone survive these two turns, even if they work together. One of them has to be dominant, or they both sink.

The reason they sink is that two *big* major invasions hit the country from both ends the same turn, sandwiching the "English."

First, *after* all Green peoples still on the map have moved for turn fifteen, in come the Norwegians (Purple) to take the northern half of the country with ten armies. The Norwegian player has a double-move, but needs to conserve his strength, mainly because if his leader is alive next turn, he gets one *new* army for *each* area he holds! If the Norwegians spread out too thin in the face of a strong English force (Green or Red), they will die. If there are neither strong Red nor Green forces around, however, it's time

to rock and roll through York.

If there is a strong Saxon army, then Red has a tough decision. He can either use it to counterattack and weaken the Norwegians, a move he should certainly consider if he can kill their king, or to move his forces *away* from the English channel and *abandon* Southern England. Why? Because after he moves, in will come the Normans with their ten armies, four of which are the hard-riding, tough to kill, Saxon-murdering Knights. If the Saxons are in the way, they die. If they are back away, with Harold the Saxon leader amidst a main army bunkering in some rough ground, like Wales or the Pennines, then they have a chance. Otherwise, the Normans will look for Harold and kill him, and probably knock Red right out of the game.

Turn sixteen is once again either a three-way or a two-way fight. If the English (Red Saxons or Green Dano-Welsh) survive in strength, they have to knock out one of the two invaders, Norwegian or Norman, before big reinforcements can be raised in England by the invaders. Green and Red can combine a one-two punch on the Normans, and might even convince Purple to use his Norwegians on the Normans in a one-two-three knockout blow. The key to either is the Norwegians, who cannot be seriously hurt by combination attacks before they get their turn.

Only one of the players will come out on top in this last turn, and players should remember that if the Saxons win, then there will be no Richard the Lionheart, no Robin Hood and no reason for anybody to write "Ivanhoe." If the Norwegians win, moreover, then this magazine would be published in some indecipherable Germanic script. On the other hand, if the Normans win, then we can all live in the knowledge that we have let history repeat itself in Britannia. ■

