

# Games From Folktales

Transcripts for January 2017

**Origins of Hermetic Magic**

**Whaling in Mythic Europe**

**Falling back through time**

**Sanctuary of Ice:  
The boring bit at the start**

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**Games From  
Folktales**

January 2017

# Origins of Hermetic Magic

Thoth's Grimoire, and the price of finding it, are described in an earlier podcast episode, called "Gods can't see you in Mythic Europe."

Basically, it's a saga-ending McGuffin.

The Mythic Seas says that Hermetic magi have discovered proof that they aren't descended from the Cult of Mercury:: actually they violently drove it to extinction. The local Jerbiton demands the Order be dissolved. Apparently he's in favour of returning to the pre-Order chaos of all hunting all.

I'd just ignore that.

There are active Mercurians described in Faith and Flame.

aligned to the Faerie Realm were served by a caste of magicians who created practical enchanted devices.

The earliest magicians we have clear evidence for is Imhotep, who was said to have invented many of the basic elements of architecture, and codified medicine. He was probably the first akh: the embodied immortals described in Lands of the Nile. Subsequent akhu are active in Mythic Europe, often acting as generals for the Black in its war with the Red. The tomb of Imhotep has never been found: he might be off anywhere, and he's had at least two millennia to set up his places of power.

I suggest the point where the magicians in Egypt switch over, so that practical magic becomes more politically significant than devotional magic, occurs when the Ptolemies arrive. Devotional magic continues, but the Ptolemies, who considered themselves successors to Alexander the Great, were not tied directly to the old cults. They primarily venerated Serapis, who was their familial divinity. The first High Priest of this new god might have been Mantheo, some of whose works survive to the current day.

At this point Ptolemy I founded the Great Library of Alexandria. The first librarian was Demetrius of Phalereum, a student of Aristotle. The librarians who followed were often astronomers of great skill. Cleopatra VII, effectively the last Ptolemy, was reputed a great sorceress and alchemist. Her daughter, Cleopatra Selene, was raised in Rome, sent to rule Mauretania, and had a court with Egyptian, Hellenic and Roman magicians.

We know where magic comes from. When the Nephilim fell, they had children with humans, and taught them useful arts. One of these was magic. God drowned all of the children of the Nephilim in Noah's Flood, although rumours persist that one of the wives on board had tainted blood, and magic continued through her. Assuming magic died out in the Flood, how was it reignited in the civilisations that rose from Noah's sons?

The ancestor of Hermetic magic reappears in the kingdom of Noah's grandson Mizraim: which is now called Egypt. Some early Christian writers claimed that the monuments of Egypt were created by the people before the Flood, and the land then resettled by Noah's descendants. In this case, magic is relearned from written records. The people who live in Egypt in 1220 do not believe this is correct.

The Muslim view is that the vast, and slightly ridiculous, over-abundance of monuments in Egypt occurs because Allah wants it to be that way. This encourages humans to go to Egypt and view them, which also encourages them to head off to Mecca. Saying there are too many monuments in Egypt is kind of like looking at the Atlantic and saying "Seems like an unnecessary amount of water over there, God." It's a failure to deal with reality as created.

By the time of its recurrence, the people had fallen away from the God who would later rescue the Jews, and worshipped other deities. Most of these were potent faeries. The priesthood

The Roman history of the Order is described in the The Second Edition book "Order of Hermes". Parts of it don't congeal into a single narrative.

It says that the Order is descended from the Cult of Mercury. This was founded by the Romans after they borrowed Hermes from the Greeks, as they were growing their Empire. They were not one of the most powerful priesthoods, but their rituals helped keep the Empire together. In the second century BC Plentarch of the Mercurian temple of Pompeii codified the thirty-eight rituals of the cult, but these books have been lost. The cult declined with the rise of Christianity, and was effectively mummery by 300 AD. When Constantine made Christianity the state religion, the remaining magi moved out of the cities, and the Cult fell with Rome's loss to barbarians.

This is poor historiography. Then again, it was written before Google, so we need to be forgiving.

The Roman Empire begins, depending on your views, in 27 BCE. That's hundreds of years after Plentarch. Let's assume they meant the Republic? Mercury turns up in the Roman pantheon in the 4th Century BCE, so Plentarch might be an early leader. Note that Pompeii is not part of the Republic at this stage: it's a sort of tributary. It was annexed by the Republic in 89 BC.

Constantine doesn't make Christianity the state religion. He just makes it legal to be Christian in 313 AD. It becomes the state religion in 380 AD. The Empire reached maximum size

in 117 and Rome was sacked in 409. The timeline just doesn't seem to work.

There's further detail of the decline in the Iberia book, but in it the Cult falls because of an insistence among the magi that new recruits have pure, Roman blood. This is an idea which speaks strongly to a modern audience, but isn't culturally congruent in the Roman context. This may be due to the line style at the time, which can be summed up by pointing out that book's theme was Corruption, and there were demons under every rock.

Order of Hermes also suggests that there was once a civilisation of magical creatures living in the hollow of the Mediterranean basin. One of their number destroyed the dam across the Pillars of Hercules, flooding their lands. Survivors become the gods of Egypt and Greece, or the dragons, but faded from reality due to boredom. Humans were their servants. The destroyer was Thoth, who does this because he's ugly and jealous that he can't get laid.

I recall, at the time, thinking this was similar to the destruction of the Tanu in Julian May's "The Golden Torc".

We can do better than this with Atlantis, Thoth, the Egyptian god of magic (Heka) and the goddess who taught humans magic (Thoth's wife Sheshet the Lady of the Libraries).

I'm happy for it to be a theory among the Seekers: but with out modern research tools, we can do so much better than this.

How do we make the leap from these Romans to the Order? There are many possibilities.

When we think about Trianoma and the witches of Thessaly, we often consider the spooky things which occur in the Golden Ass. We are interested in the necromancies of Erichtho. We might instead consider them as descendants of Aglaonike, an ancient astronomer. If she's a descendant of the Alexandrians, then she's a vector to get their ideas into the Order.

Mercere, the magus who works with stones and travel, seems a likely descendant of the pontifexes of ancient Rome. Their titles literally mean "bridge builders".

The Flambeau also seem to have had a strong Mercurian component to their practice, until this portion of the House was almost entirely destroyed in the Battle of the Tempest.

Matt Ryan tidies a lot of this up in Houses of Hermes : True Lineages. Bonisagus is born in Florence in 690, and is apprenticed by a wandering conjurer. He goes to all kinds of interesting places, and sees people performing various types of magic. He sees Osirian magicians. He finds a cache of Mercurian rituals. There's no descent here, in any real sense: Bonisagus is doing something entirely novel. He is the great seculariser of magic.

Various possibilities presented here work better for different styles of saga, but of them all, I like Matt's best. It works better with our later designs for the Magic and Faerie Realms.

# Whaling in Mythic Europe

Whaling is a touchy subject for modern people, so if this is going to cause you distress, there's a really excellent article about time travel a few pages on.

There are three techniques for whaling in Mythic Europe. Covenants might participate in each.

Whales beach themselves, or die in the Atlantic and are washed onto the western shores of Europe. Beached, living whales can be eaten. Sometimes the frigid sea keeps dead whales fresh enough to harvest their meat and oil. Often they have decayed, so that they are filled with noxious gasses. Characters harvesting whales need to remember that bad air and terrible smells cause disease in Mythic Europe, by unbalancing the humours.

Some fishermen are simply lucky. They see a whale near the surface and strike it with a spear, then manage to track it. Whale drives are, similarly, a matter of luck.

Whale drives are community affairs, as they work best with a flotilla of boats. The goal is to force the whales toward a beach, in the hope that they will strand.

Norwegian whalers tend to use this method, on an impromptu basis. If a group of fishermen spot a pod of whales, they try a drive: there's not a lot of evidence for professional whaling expeditions among the Norse.

The final way of catching whales used in Mythic Europe is to skewer each whale with an arrow or spear, to which has been attached a line and a drogue (a thing that drags and, generally, floats). This allows the hunters to follow the injured animal until it dies, then secure it and tow it to shore.

The drogue method is used by Basque whalers in 1220, but is not known in many of the other whaling nations. It appears in the Sixteenth Century in England, the Netherlands, and Norway. There is some argument if the vikings used it, but if they did, they didn't pass it on to anyone but the Basques.

The trade can be traced back about 120 years, but only during the game period is it spreading through the Basque territories, with royal charters to warehouse whale products being issued to various port towns by the French and Spanish crowns

The Basques have watchtowers along the coast of the Bay of Biscay, which look out for the right whale (literally, the "correct" whale). It has a distinctive waterspout. They also take the, closely-related, bowhead whale. These two species swim slowly and contain a lot of fat, which is valuable not only for sale, but because it makes the cadavers buoyant. Basques might also take grey and sperm whales/

Whale meat is considered a "fish" for the purposes of fasting. This makes it particularly welcome during the lengthy periods of Lent and Advent, when meat is frowned upon. The tongue of a whale is considered a particular delicacy, and although the whalers of Biarritz, near Bayonne, are tax exempt, they deliver all whale tongues to the bishop, as a voluntary levy.

Blubber is a mixture of fat and collagen. It is flensed from the whale, and oil is rendered from it by a process called "frying out". This involves heating strips of blubber in big cauldrons called try pots in English. A place where try pots are used is called a try works. In some places, the crispy residue of fried blubber is eaten.

Whale oil is a wonderful light source. In "Brilliant", Jane Bronx notes that the widespread use of whale oil reduced the cost of lighting a house remarkably, making artificial light far more practical. Whale oil has a strong, fishy odour, made worse by burning, so it was never as popular as candles among the wealthy.

Confusingly, whale bones are used for various tasks, much as ivory would be, but Mythic Europeans seeking "whale bone" are seeking baleen. Baleen is a type of keratin, found in the mouth of whales. It supports a sieve of hair, used to filter water for food. Baleen softens when boiled in water, which makes it easy to mould.

Baleen, called whalebone, is used to make things that need to be both strong and flexible. This is why it was used in clothes, in the real world, until steel underwiring became a cheaper alternative.

Baleen is mentioned in some early Welsh and Irish folklore. It is sometimes called "whale eyelashes" and is used to make accoutrements, like belt buckles. In this form it is carved, resulting in products like scrimshawed ivory.

There's a tiny amount of real-world archaeology which indicates baleen armour in Powys in Wales.

This style of armour is found in the New World. In Inuit examples, it's a composite of leather and moulded plates, each plate being made with multiple layers of baleen. It's a laminar armour that is, it's made of overlapping plates, like Imperial Roman lorica segmentata. In Europe it would probably be lamellar (non-overlapped plates) because that was the common technology until the rise of plate armour.

To model baleen armour, a troupe should choose how realistic they want such an exotic substance to be. It could be as protective as leather or metal scale armour. A covenant that uses baleen to mould suits could make something with as much coverage, but less durability, as metal plate. Like tailored metal plate, such baleen suits could not be swapped between wearers.

Whale baleen is generally white or ivory coloured, although many baleen items darken to brown through use. The baleen of the right whale, which is the preferred species for harvest, is black. Either's a great colour for fantasy armour.

## The Mythical Whale

There are various myths about whales. Many of them suggest they are demons. That aside, there are two main myths.

Whales are reputed to summon fish to their mouths with a sweet perfume. This is a **significato**: a hint on the meaning of life embedded in Creation by God. The whale represents the devil, or the mouth of Hell. The sweet perfume is temptation.

Whales are also said to impersonate islands, floating on the surface until trees grow on them. When a ship lands, the whale submerges, they then eat the sailors.

## Notes from current books

**Faith and Flame** describes the Basques, who are the premiere whalers in period.

Whales are described, under a variety of names, in the bestiaries for earlier editions of the game.

The most comprehensive book I've found on whaling in the period is "Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic" by Vicki Szabo.

## Form and material bonuses for whale products

**Ambergris:** The name means "grey amber". I'm not sure that in 1220 people knew the grey blobs that wash up in beaches come from sperm whales. Sperm whales aren't a hunting whale in 1220, but sometimes wash ashore. If it's amber, then +3 controlling people\* and Corpus\*. If its role as a perfume fixative is taken into account, +3 Imaginem.

**Baleen:** As the medieval version of spring steel +3 Muto.

**Blood:** Have you seen a meme about the number of your enemies you need to kill to get enough iron to make a sword from their blood? What happens if you make a sword from the blood of a whale?

**Bones:** Some medieval people used whale bones as structural elements in huts. This may have had religious significance, as bad archaeologists used to say when they couldn't understand things. Harm animals +4\*, which is important for harpoons, creating sacred architecture +3.

**Candle made of whale fat:** Summoning merrow +6

**Oil:** Light +6 (for rarity).

**Skin:** transform into a whale +7\*

**Teeth (ivory):** Healing wounds +5\*

**Tongue:** Attracting fish +9^, Speech +6\*

\* from published sources.

Player characters from our world transported to Mythic Europe were outside the line style for Ars Magica 5th edition. I tried to put them into Grogs, as a type of Time-lost Witness, but it was (rightly) pointed out Mythic Europe cannot evolve into our world without massive cosmological changes. That being said: if you don't care, you can easily add characters from our modern day to the Ars Magica setting.

Eric Flint, in discussing his Ring of Fire series, conjectures that every modern person in a bootstrap fantasy knows something that could make them rich in the past. His own travellers have the advantage that they moved in a group, with a large number of modern machines. It may be that the magi, not the time-lost, are the exception in their community.

Lacking access to magic or machine tools, it is difficult to generate spare parts for pieces of technology as they wear out. Communities which fall back in time find their technology level stabilising lower, based on their available resources. With the assistance of magic, however, machines can be repaired and even improved. Much as a magus making an elephant need not know how many toes there are on an elephant, so a magus making a steam locomotive doesn't really need to know how it works.

Magic makes good the lack.

Individuals lost on their own, once they can communicate may join covenants in a variety of roles. For example, an autocrat's main skills are reading, book-keeping and managing people. You could run a great game where a modern temp agency lunch room fell back in time. I once played a great game where my Edwardian butler became a priest and kingmaker in ancient Egypt.,

### General Minor Flaw: Worthless Abilities

A time-lost character must have about 30 experience points which are rendered valueless by their shift in time. For example, she may have (Area) Lore of 3 for a city that no longer exists, or her Etiquette score may have been rendered useless by changing social structures. Troupes may permit companions to purchase this Flaw multiple times.

This can include language Abilities, which are often rendered worthless by time travel.

**Delusions**, that they are dreaming or can return to their own time, are also common.

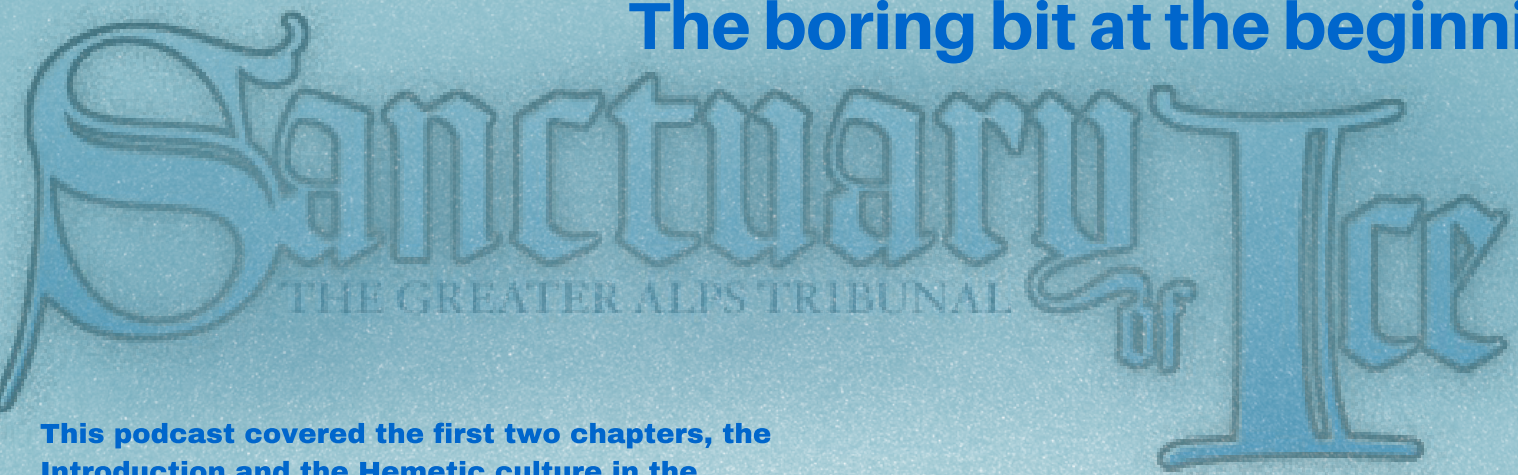
I'd just treat guns as magic items with a limited number of uses. Frankly, in a game where people can cast Incantation of Lightning, I'm not too fussed about a Glock.

You might, instead, say that primers and powder don't expand explosively in Mythic Europe.



Falling backward in time

# The boring bit at the beginning



This podcast covered the first two chapters, the Introduction and the Hematic culture in the Greater Alps. Future Sanctuary episodes will each be a single covenant.

Ars Magica was a very different game 15 years ago. It was low fantasy and the historical research was, if not worse, then deliberately less detailed. The level of research that I did then could be done in a weekend today and could be far surpassed by anyone who had the free time and an internet connection.

The game was also different because - or at least this was the argument I made at the time and I realise some people will disagree - the primarily American audience of the game was looking for something akin to a western, where the characters go out into the wilderness and carve out a settlement for themselves.

A point that I tried to make - and may have hammered home quite heavily in the first few chapters of Sanctuary of Ice - was that for characters to be heading ever westward seeking newer pastures there had to be somewhere back east. A place with more resources and more infrastructure from which your characters come.

When I first started writing Sanctuary of Ice it was going to be a book about designing older covenants: that layer was peeled away and only the example covenants left.

Sanctuary of Ice is a little bit different from the other early books in that it's difficult to pick a particular covenant that's the villain. The earlier books generally all had a villain covenant. The reason for it was to make stories very easy to design. It's easier if the foe comes pre-designed. Basically, the villain was whoever wanted to tell you what to do.

I wanted to get to the point where people were trying to manipulate you not because they had a will to power, but because they had goals they wanted to achieve. I'm not certain that worked in all cases, so I'm looking forward to going back, through this podcast, and finding ways to extrapolate and extend upon the material.

The second edition book "Order of Hermes" said that there were seven covenants in the Greater Alps. I wanted more, and to get around that problem (rather than saying that the earlier book was wrong) I used the chapter house system.

People have often said that I invented chapter houses, but I don't believe I did. I believe I took them from an earlier work. Regardless they were used for getting around that restriction. Thus we begin the tradition of design by accrual, which makes the game more difficult for new people to grasp.

I'd also briefly like to make the point that the terminology - chapterhouse - doesn't make any sense. A chapter house is a room in a monastery or attached to a cathedral where monks read at a biblical chapter, or a chapter of the rule that they follow, each day. I presume it's a misattribution and what's meant is a dependency or a daughter house. This comes up explicitly later when one of the covenants is referred to as the Motherhouse.

Two of the covenants are not described. This has always been how tribunal books work, but the problem is that means if you are wanting a complete setting out of the box, chunks are missing. I wrote all seven: the others will be included in this project. If you want a classic, evil, autumn covenant to bully your characters, the lack of covenants gives you the space to add one.



The next few pages deal with virtues that tie your characters to Sanctuary setting, even if your covenant is set somewhere else. The idea being that your characters could visit this tribunal without having to have a covenant here.

In the early tribunal books, this was not how things were done: each of the tribunals had a different theme and a different feel: a different genre. I'd argue that if we were to do it again we should go that way.

In some of the later books you get repetitions. Where is the Autumn covenant who are the villains? Who are the plucky Spring covenant beset by faeries? In the same way that an empty tic tac toe board initially seems to present nine options but actually only gives you three, when you're picking a tribunal that is some sensation, particularly in the older tribunal books, that the choices don't actually matter. They are iterations on a smaller number of choices with different props.

Different genres would disrupt that repetitive pattern. It would also solve Forum questions like "Which tribunal should I play in?" Genre tags make it easier: if Transylvania is Gothic horror and England is Comedy and Spain is Spaghetti Western (pick your own) it makes the choice easier.

I also like the idea of games with genre bonuses for spellcasting. It helps players keep tone. I had a great game where the characters were members of the Royal Society and spell levels were a magnitude lower if they were stereotypically British.

I used Roman symbols as status markers. The Order claims descent from a group of Roman magicians, and the material was close to hand. When you're writing, you don't know how many shots you'll get.

If you find good material you might as well use it. You can make arguments that a person should be patient and wait for the appropriate book, but who knows if the appropriate book is going to come?

The map in the introduction isn't excellent. I am not criticizing the people who made the map: they drew the map based on transparencies I sent by email. The modern day the tools we have to construct maps are just so much better. With Transylvania we traded Google maps with pins in them not just for places but plot hooks. I'll look at that as part of this process. The covenants are placed to support a border found in a previous book: they would be in different places, based on research, if this were done again. I'll address that in later episodes.

Having worked through the first chapter now let's look at the second chapter.

I took an icepick to the idea of covenants living in manorial seclusion. I did this again in Covenants, because it's the lazy design choice: the obvious design choice. It's the medieval-feeling design choice in the sense everyone wants a castle and to be left alone.

Books that you pay for shouldn't necessarily cater to that choice. The books have to push extremes because otherwise, having read them, you don't feel like you seen anything new: so the book seems stale. Also very early Ars Magica authors didn't understand how feudalism worked. This isn't their fault: the understanding of feudalism has expanded a lot in the last two decades.

Early writing tended to see the way the Normans behaved in England as the model of feudalism which everyone else followed. That was never the case: they were a fringe exception. People were interdependent and pyramidal power structures really didn't happen. Even in British history, that pyramid deals structure was an ideal. It was an ideal that people who were fighting to be on the tip of the pyramid respected only in the sense that it gave them a role to aspire to.

In Sanctuary of Ice, everyone needed to have enough is to maintain themselves to maintain voting rights. This is a direct response to some of the material which had been in the previous Ars Magica books. They stated that magic was fading out of the world because magi were overusing the resources which were available to them. I thought that if magicians have noticed this trend, they would do something about it, and the people who would do something about it were the people who had the most to lose.

Initially magi with guaranteed vis seem independently wealthy, but really aren't getting anything they don't already have through the covenant design process.

In the new edition none of this is necessary because, if anything, magic is becoming more common. Magical auras appear around places where great magic is performed or where magical creatures live. Your characters are doing great magic, so they are grinding the mundane shell off the world.

Magic fading out is necessary if you want to do something like Tolkein or Mage, but that's not terribly interesting and strong stances against it would be taken in later books. This means that in the new edition, Public Vis Source lacks the strong moral underpinning it had when we were talking about population control for conservation purposes.

This is the first time a tribunal has a taxing power.

If Hermetic warfare is rare then, once again, feudal territorial structures break down. In feudal England, at least theoretically, about a castle are people who can take shelter there. When they are not doing that they tend the land about the castle, to maintain the lord's capacity to defend them. That's romanticized: it's not really how medieval peasants felt about the whole thing, but that's the theory.

if you are not going to be having regular wars, power diffuses over the resources available, and because it's not encoded in architecture it becomes rather more like Southeast Asian structures: concentric circles of influence which people into these things call "mandalas".

If you have a series of concentric circles of influence, and you have some belief that military aggression is unlikely, there is no reason to gather all of your magi together. You can instead spread them out into those places where their research is most assisted by the environment. This is where the chapter idea comes in.

The ideas that magi murder their evil children, and ostracise their enemies, were placed in this book, again, so that characters who were somewhere else could be drawn in.

...And when I say somewhere else I mean England. Everyone was playing in the British Isles at this stage of the game.

How can you be enticed to travel to the Alps if your covenant is in Britain? This is a major focus of the first two chapters. Later Tribunal books, other than merely giving the mechanism of ostracism, would give a series of plot hooks directly. For example:

**Your characters discover a diary from a beloved mentor that indicates that they were ostracized from the Alps for a crime they did not commit. The characters can investigate, then ameliorate or avenge.**

**An ostracized archmage moves into your tribunal and is spending his time plotting revenge. He asks for your assistance, or is grabbing resources of yours.**

**A character's mentor has been ostracized and must move all of her valuables out of the Alps. She asks for the characters' assistance to transport valuable, mystical treasures.**

The modern writing style is that pretty much everything should tie directly into plot hooks rather than merely imply plot hooks.

If everything is permanently in the state of about to boil over it doesn't make sense to split the party by sending people travelling. In history, however, we have examples of people who do just this. Good King Macbeth from Scotland goes to Rome and leaves his kingdom for two years without many problems. The kings of England never do this, except during Crusades, because the kings are permanently in a state of war (either within or with France) and so they can't afford to take time away from the realm.

Travel magic was rarer in early tribunal books. This is one of the first that tries to edge around that inconvenience, again to drag in characters who live elsewhere.

**Hoplites already existed, but the idea that they worked for a tour of duty, had stations, and were rewarded with longevity potions was new. Before this, a Guernicus would ride into town like a sheriff in a Western, discover wrongdoing, and then be able to do anything about it. They started having violent deputies, but these were ad hoc.**

**In this edition, longevity potions required Corpus magic, and so every sensible magician eventually specialised in it. If you spent time doing something else, like fighting for the stability of the Order, you would age and die faster than more self-interested people. The free potions allow characters to maintain their specialisations. This is less important with the newer edition's aging rules.**

**I added amaranth, which is an addictive drug that affects magi, because I wanted characters to have the possibility of committing crimes that would have a penalty less serious than death. The Code hasn't a lot of grey in crime stories.**

**It was not explicit in any of the previous books that Merceres borrowed magic items from a reserve that their House maintained, even though that seems obvious. The items are called "Whitlams" which some Australian players have thought was a nod to Gough Whitlam, an Australian Prime Minister who believed in building up public assets. This isn't directly the case: I was listening to an album called "Love This City", by the Whitlams, when I wrote this.**

**The annual Ceremony of Welcome was a device to draw together the party. A fault in the earlier system was that an apprentice could only be freed at a Tribunal. I presume the idea was that the tribunals would rotate around Europe, but as the books were written, the tribunals were set to be within a year of each other. An annual ceremony, and interfering elders, are one way to get a variety of disparate magi together.**

**The magical fair at Tribunal now seems like an obvious idea, but in the early books, the point of the Mercere network was to fulfil those needs.**

**The magical games were included to push the idea that magi do not seek Experience points at all times. They have lives outside increasing their power.**