

Games From Folktales

Episodes 11 to 16

August and September 2016

An experiment in podcasting for the Ars Magica roleplaying game

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Games From Folktales

Series Two

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Mythic Europe is

tiny



Travel magic doesn't work very well in Ars Magica, at least in the core rules. As the line has progressed many of the authors, me included, have found ways to sabotage that and allow your party to get whatever they want to go, without participating in on-the-road adventures.

This perhaps expresses a difference in philosophy of game design. Very early Ars Magica might have been influenced by Dungeons and Dragons, where the idea of the wandering monster - a randomly-appearing creature that causes combat for no particular reason - was very popular. In Ars injuries are more difficult to heal than in Dungeons and Dragons. One big combat encounter can have the party laid up for months and therefore, dramatically, during the story random encounters are at best a distraction.

There may be other reasons for trying to keep young magicians in their pen. One of them was that in earlier versions of Ars Magica, magicians were destroying the magical landscape around them. If your magicians were able to move further, it would be difficult to explain why the small, magical things that appeared in your characters area had not already been clear-felled by the magi from a from a powerful covenant.

The current edition gets around this somewhat by having geographical features generate their own magical spirits, which are in some sense persistent. Even if the spirit of a mountain is destroyed, because the mountain is there, eventually a spirit will be generated instead, or the mountain will fall down. Something else will take its place, like a spirit of the plain. Fairies are mobile and have the ability to re-emerge from Arcadia even if destroyed or harvested - well perhaps. It

deliberately doesn't say how they work, so that magicians don't just destroy the fae forest around them increasingly broad concentric circles, making the land mundane.

Another reason why travel magic doesn't work terribly well in Ars Magica is because it's not nearly as necessary as we think. I'm Australian, and there are a surprising number of Australian authors in Ars Magica. A lot of other authors for Ars Magica are from the United States. It is very difficult for us to conceive of precisely how tiny Mythic Europe is.

Before I played a lot of Ars Magica I was fascinated by Pendragon and by Arthuriana. Allow me to consider one case from that: that kingdom of Cornwall. Cornwall is a kingdom that also contains a duchy. The king of Cornwall is one of the core rivals of King Arthur, indeed eventually he sacks Camelot. (Spoilers). It takes people an enormous amount of time to ride from his court to Camelot even though there is an excellent road. Now we might take from this that Cornwall is massive: but it is tiny. It is slightly smaller than Long Island in the United States. For Australians, it is about twice the size of Fraser Island.

Also it's not particularly difficult to get around provided that you're willing to sail. This was the preferred method of transit for many people in Europe, simply because it was far faster. We tend to think of the seas as barriers, particularly if you come from the Australian literary tradition, where the point of sending people to Australia was that the entire place was surrounded by sea which was controlled by the British navy, so we would never get off. There is, I believe, a similar tradition in America that the country is defended by the Atlantic and Pacific. This isn't how medieval Europeans saw the sea, with the exception of the English

Channel which was mythically rough. Indeed in the time of the Roman invasion was thought to be mystically rough: you couldn't land unless the king asked you to come, which the Romans managed by trickery.

So Cornwall is tiny. It doesn't seem tiny to us here because we have a lot of sources, which means that the amount of folkloristic material which we can find for quite large cities in other places (like Hungary) is the same as the amount of folkloristic material we can find for quite small villages in areas whose populations are English speaking, or have been superseded by English-speaking people. This makes Cornwall seem larger simply because we have more material to write about.

Cornwall is the obvious absence in Heirs to Merlin. It is the place where you would park a covenant if you wanted to use the material with the least fiction with currently described covenants. To supplement this, some of us wrote a "vanilla covenant" free web supplement, which encouraged you to investigate Cornwall. In looking at it I found the travelling across Cornwall, without magic, in a single day, is perfectly doable. It has always seemed strange to me that the redcaps best skilled at using travel magic to teleport are the ones based in the Mercer House in London, in what is one of the tiniest of the tribunals.

Personally I like the supposition that the reason that they have teleporting cavalymen in Stonehenge Tribunal is because it has been separated from the Roman road network, which House Mercere somehow uses to facilitate their work in

the rest of Europe and North Africa. There are Roman roads in Britain (well, there were, most of them have been robbed out). There is a Mercer House in London, at the place one would be wanted if it acted as a mystical connection to the rest of Europe. To claim, however, that the Roman road network in Britain runs all the way to the golden stele in the Agora of Rome seems a stretch, unless there's some sort of invisible bridge or secret tunnel. These are awesome campaign ideas, but let's imagine they don't have them.

Here we strike the solution to one of the tiny, niggling questions in ancestral spell design: why is Seven League Stride only seven leagues? Folkloristically we know seven leagues, or 21 miles, was the distance a man was expected to march during a day. Who would develop a spell that has a teleportation distance of 21 miles. Presumably originally they had shorter spells and stopped at that point. What could they have been attempting to do?

My answer is this. If you look at the strait between France and England, the narrowest point is 20.3 miles. 21 miles seems to me a perfect spell to allow House Mercere's representatives to hop the Channel. Other than it being the product of some sort of dedicated project like this I can't see why it has that limitation: why it isn't just Arcane Connection range so you can teleport anywhere Mythic Europe.

So to summarize for players outside of Europe: one of the reasons that you might feel that your character needs travel magic is because you don't understand precisely how small Mythic Europe actually is.

What is a Sampo?



With notes on mythic Finnish catburglary

**I'm not saying
I'm a catburglar,
but it seems to me that**

**if you are using
an ox and plough
you may be
doing it wrong**

The Kalevala is epic poetry from Finland. Essentially it is about three wizards who have a feud with a witch from Lapland. During the, slightly convoluted, story one of the wizards marries the witch's daughter, and in exchange for that privilege he uses materials, that the which provides, to create something called the Sampo What the Sampo is, is entirely unclear.

The version which I was reading, which is by Lonnrut, suggests that the Sampo is a magical mill. There are other magical mills in folklore. You've probably heard "Why the sea is salt.?" Essentially a magical salt mill was dropped to the bottom and it's been grinding out salt ever since. This Sampo may be similar to that, but instead it creates salt on one side, grain on another, and gold on another.

We know little about the Sampo. It's in a box, it has a multi-colored lid, and that it is small enough to be stored in a copper coated cave near the town of Pajola. We know that it gets stored for long enough for roots to grow around it. One of the wizards, Leminkinen, when he breaks seem to steal it, finds that he can't remove it. He sneaks in again with an ox and plough, and ploughs around the Sampo to destroy all the roots.

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So the magi board their boat and head back to their own kingdom, Kalev. The witch Louhi follows them, but they destroy her ship with magic. She reforms it into a great bird-like body for herself that has warriors for feathers, and sickles for claws. (Which is something that we should really look at for Ars Magic. It's kind of awesome. She essentially creates a mecha for herself out of the boat.)

Leaving that aside, the Sampo gets shattered and some parts of it wash up on Kalev, and they become the futility of the land. Louhi catches some parts of it and she takes those back to Lapland (which user why Lapland is basically a terrible place because she doesn't get very good bits).

So that's the Sampo. It's a magic box that creates wealth and fertility. Or is it?

Some of the people suggest that Lonrot was wrong when he said that it was a magical mill. They suggest that it was a world tree. So when Leminkinen frees the Sampo from the roots by taking an Ox of Virtue, and the finest plough in Finland, then drawing the plough around to cut the roots off. Maybe he's actually cutting the tree down.

Maybe the plan was always that the Sampo would be broken into pieces, and pieces would be scattered on the kingdom of Kalev. When it happens the senior magician who's there, Vainomoinen, is not sad: it's pretty much exactly what he wanted. This seems strange to the reader, if it is a box that makes gold.

The world tree is an idea that turns up a couple of times in *Ars Magica*. The Hungarian shamans believed they had a world tree and believed the tree was moved or destroyed when Christianity arrived (which would be the really unfortunate for shamans who were, at that time, up the world tree in the Magic realm because they would be stuck up there).

Criamon creates a world tree, in that he creates the Axis Magica which is much the same thing. It's an elevator to the Magic Realm: a place where you can be connected with the underlying mechanisms which run the universe. Now we find out that one of the exoteric mysteries of House Criamon is that Tree is actually the living embodiment of the Founder, and that the World Tree is temporary, that at some point Criamon's strength will fail. He will fade into Twilight and when he does that the ability to go into Twilight will be removed from other magi. So it's quite important to get everyone out of Dodge before that happens.

So if we take the *Kalevala* and the work of Criamon together, at least twice, someone in Mythic Europe has been

able to build the world tree, and by building it become the dominant kingdom / power / social group. Is it possible for the characters to build another world tree?

The answer is, apparently, yes. It's already happened several times. Magical people using impossible ingredients and unparalleled skills have managed to create something that permanently alters the tide of magic around the world. When that object shatters it creates points of archetypal fertility in the world around it. If these were trivially easy to make you'd want to make them on a regular basis, so that you could bootstrap the world up into the Magic Realm just by gradually loading it down with the dust of world trees.

How would you go about making the world tree? Here we may strike on one of the reasons why we know so little of it founder Criamon. Perhaps the reason we know so little of his early biography is that he deliberately doesn't want other characters to create a world tree. Other than perhaps his followers, who he can communicate with should it prove necessary at some future time, he doesn't want House Tremere (for example) popping up world tree in Wales somewhere thereby making Britain top nation and producing an early British Empire.

We know Criamon was tortured by his master, to give him spiritual enlightenment. It also drove him, because he believed in reincarnation, to want to break the wheel of time and get everyone out of the world. The stringent, somewhat ascetic, practices undertaken by the Criamon are his gentler way of dealing with his apprentices: giving them the same initiations that he had, without that torture rituals and scarification that he himself suffered. His name seems to have it certain Egyptian feel to it, although that may be deceptive. He claims a certain descent from Empedocles, who was a magician active in the ancient world who eventually committed suicide by jumping into Mount Etna. Or, at least, wished people to

and left his sandal on the slopes of Etna. He's one of the Founders who is still around, in the sense that that his consciousness is intact and in some sense is linked to those of the ghosts in the Cave of Twisting Shadows in that it's an enormous genius locus.

The third magician, the one who makes the Sampo, is called Ilmarinen. He is a blacksmith: the finest in the world. When the sun and the moon are stolen by the which Louhi, he tries to make new ones out of gold and silver. It doesn't quite work out for him because that's not a possible thing, according to the senior wizard, but Ilmarinen seriously believes that it's possible. He seriously thinks that it's within his competence to create a new sun and moon for his people. So if Criamon used the same method as made the Sampo, where did he grab a peerless smith?

Now it seems strange he comes from somewhere around Etna which is one of the forges of Hephaestus. If you were looking for a perfect smith you could conceivably find one there. For example the golden women are still theoretically around somewhere, and know everything he knew because they were his forge wives and assisted him in all his projects. Perhaps it was one of them. Maybe Criamon himself was a smith and we just don't notice because he approached it in some sort of weird spiritual sense. Maybe there was some sort of relationship between Criamon and Verditus that we are aware of.

What materials would we use to construct the Sampo? This is something that we can't be sure of. The folklore that I'm reading seems to indicate that the Sampo is made out of some very mundane items: a drop of milk, a grain of corn (wheat in this case, not maize), a tuft of wool, and a sliver of a distaff. These things represent fertility and vitality. These are, I suggest, perfect items which have been drawn out of the World of Forms, and placed into the mundane world so that they can be replicated. When the Sampo is broken

into pieces this ability to replicate, in the mystic sense, is retained by those pieces. This brings vitality to the land of the Kalevs by creating faerie auras.

How does Criamon get to the Realm of Forms so that he can take a perfect grain of wheat, perfect tuft of wool and so on? The Order does not currently know where the Cave of Bonisagus was. It was mentioned in the rough draft of Sanctuary of Ice that it was hidden from the Order because a secret covenant dedicated to surviving the destruction of the Order was hidden there. All of that was cut out except for one piece of artwork which shows a member of that covenant spying on a tribunal meeting. (Yes I have been reading Second Foundation).

My suggestion is that the Cave of Bonisagus became the Cave of Twisting Shadows. The world tree was placed at the origin point of the Order because the rituals which allowed the Order's formation created the first Level 10 Aura: the first entry to the magic realm allowing access to the items necessary to make the world trade. Bonisagus heads on out to Durenmar, because he knows Criamon is going to do some weird stuff that doesn't suit his new, secular method of magic.

It might be possible for the characters to make a new world tree. Magi falling into Twilight could bring back the required items. The winner of the Verditus Competition of Seven Years might be able to combine them into a new world tree.

What happens if there are multiple world trees simultaneously? Does it create a multipolar world with different styles of magic that are stronger or weaker geographically? Does it create mystical weather patterns, where the two types of energy clash and infuse strangely, creating new types of elementals? Can it create rival types of magic, like the dark and light courts of Faerie fairy or the Infernal and Blessed axis of holy magic?

Would House Criamon prevent the creation of additional world trees or is the eventual creation of a whole forest of world trees part of their plan to assist in the escape from the world? Is it, perhaps, the great plan that next time the world tree will be planted in an inverted form. The trunk is in the Magic Realm and its many leaves and branches emerge into spaces in the mundane world, each of these allowing an avenue out of reality and into the mystical refuge beyond.



Do not eat the werebear

In the Kalevala, the people from the village of the heroes are tormented by the curses of a witch. One is that she sends among them a terrible bear, to harass their herds. He is referred to as Otso, and the people flatter him in the most extraordinary and duplicitous way.

Vainomoinen, the chief wizard, goes to Otso and points out he cannot defeat him, so he asks Otso's mercy. He offers Otso all of the comforts of his town. As they approach, there is much singing and rejoicing. The people, as one, chant songs about how they have missed Otso, and how they have cried waiting for the honour of his coming. The bear is taken within the feasting hall, as a guest who is esteemed as a herald of the gods, and who is a lost cousin come home.



THIS THE ANSWER OF THE TRIBE-FOLK:
"WE SALUTE THEE, MIGHTY OTSO,
HONEY-PAW, WE BID THEE WELCOME,
WELCOME TO OUR COURTS AND CABINS,
WELCOME, LIGHT-FOOT, TO OUR TABLES
DECORATED FOR THY COMING!
WE HAVE WISHED FOR THEE FOR AGES,
WAITING SINCE THE DAYS OF CHILDHOOD,
FOR THE NOTES OF TAPIO'S BUGLE,
FOR THE SINGING OF THE WOOD-NYMPHS,
FOR THE COMING OF DEAR OTSO,
FOR THE FOREST GOLD AND SILVER,
WAITING FOR THE YEAR OF PLENTY,
LONGING FOR IT AS FOR SUMMER,
AS THE SHOE WAITS FOR THE SNOW-FIELDS,
AS THE SLEDGE FOR BEATEN HIGHWAYS,
AS THE MAIDEN FOR HER SUITOR,
AND THE WIFE HER HUSBAND'S COMING;
SAT AT EVENING BY THE WINDOWS,
AT THE GATES HAVE, SAT AT MORNING,
SAT FOR AGES AT THE PORTALS,
NEAR THE GRANARIES IN WINTER, VANISHED,
TILL THE SNOW-FIELDS WARMED AND
TILL THE SAILS UNFURLED IN JOYANCE,
TILL THE EARTH GREW GREEN AND BLOSSOMED,
THINKING ALL THE WHILE AS FOLLOWS:
"WHERE IS OUR BELOVED OTSO,
WHY DELAYS OUR FOREST-TREASURE?
HAS HE GONE TO DISTANT EHSTLAND,
TO THE UPPER GLENS OF SUOMI?"

--

THE KALEVALA - LONROTT TRANSLATION

Then they eat him.

In the process, Vainomoinen strips Otso of his characteristics and powers. In one translation he adds these to his own, gaining Otso's size and strength. It's unclear if he is literally becoming a werebear during this ritual. In the Lonrott translation this process of removal safeguards Otso's characteristics so that he does not lose them, as part of the feasting process.

In the end, the people give thanks to the Creator, and ask that a similar feast be sent to them again. Otso is given an air burial, which closely resembles the story of his birth, previously told by Vainomoinen. This may indicate that the bard is aware of the cyclical nature of faeries, and is preparing Otso for return. If this is the case, the keeping of his sensory organs, which presumably contain vis, is necessary for his rapid regeneration. Damaging them may damage Otso's material form in its next iteration.

A similar story involves the goat the pulls Thor's chariot. Thor eats it each night and it is reborn each day, unharmed, until some fool cracks on of its bones to get the marrow out. Thor's crippled goat cannot be made whole again, although it can be restored to some degree with a false bone made of a sacred type of wood.

Sometimes in *Ars Magica* it is unclear why Birna, also called Bjornaer, the werebear, left her own tradition of shapeshifters, fleeing into the protection of the Hermetic Order, and creating a rift that remains until the game's present day. Now that we know some people festively eat werebears her motives may be more apparent. Even if you don't accept that Birna was fleeing something like the caludrons and golden dishes of Vainomoinen, the question remains as to if this is what is happening at the Gathering of Twelve Yeats. Is this the year of plenty mentioned in the excerpt? It's possible that a sacred animal is sent to be butchered by the congregants: their power to transform being given to them, or reinforced, by this cyclical process of consumption of a herald from their creator spirit.

On a more material basis: Hermetic magi going into places where this ritual was practiced may wish to find the ritual spaces, because it was traditional for the bones of the bear to be displayed in a sacred ossuary-space so as not to be disturbed. Some commentators of the Kalevala scholars claim these sites have been found and that the skulls in particular are displayed. They may contain vis, and if they have a regenerative property, so that a bear containing vis is drawn to the area, then they are a vis source.



**Slightly
unnatural
water**

**solvent
adherent
coherent
expands into ice
dissipates heat
heavy
incompressible**

In Ars Magica we have four elemental arts. The one which fits the magic system least well is Aquam, and because it doesn't fit the system particularly well, there have been very few Aquam specialists designed during the game. The story of the Founders didn't explain where Aquam came from: the druid Diedne perhaps, so that's why we don't know much about it.

In the free, vanilla covenant supplement we used Aquam's origin, with the mystery cult of Nodens. I also used this a long time ago in Sanctuary of Ice, when I suggested that the was a protofounder interested in the art of Aquam near Lake Geneva. The protofounders are the magicians who trained with Bonisagus but did not go on to found Houses, generally because they were elderly and died during the lengthy process of the setting up of the Order of Hermes.

Let's look at one facet of the art. The spell guidelines say that slightly unnatural water, or liquids, are easier to create than highly unnatural water. What counts as slightly or highly unnatural? Those of us who have played Aquam magi know you can use this rule to end run the magic item creation process by creating highly unnatural liquids.

"This water, when you drink it, makes you fly." is a highly unnatural liquid, but should it be prevented? Probably. How about "This liquid, itself, flies so if I fill a cauldron with it, an then I can fly by sitting in the cauldron." You get damp, but you can still fly without mastering other Arts which are usually required for travel magic.

Without wanting to stake out the furthest edges of what's possible with the art of Aquam, I'd like to define what a slightly unnatural liquid is. In my own campaigns, a slightly unnatural liquid takes one of the natural properties of water and expands it to an unusual, supernatural degree. Let's just work through these natural properties of water and see what can be done with them.

Water is a solvent. This means that acids are slightly unnatural liquids rather than being highly unnatural, just because they're very effective in combat scenarios. I also allow specific solvents. For example, a heist could be performed by creating a liquid that dissolved silver specifically, flooding the basement of a miser, then evaporating the runoff for the silver dust. In my campaign that would be slightly unnatural. This also allows a character to non-violently disarm opponents. Water which is a specific solvent for iron could be used spray enemies down so that their gear degrades.

Water is incredibly heavy. We tend not to think about it as being heavy because it doesn't hold its shape. If you've ever tried working in a building which has a flat roof, particularly during the cyclone season in north Queensland you'll know that raindrops are essentially pebbles that are slightly friendlier. If you wanted to crush something you could easily do it with a column of water..

When editing this podcast I came back in at this point to mention snow. I've seen snow twice in my life, I believe. I live in northern Australia where snow is a thing that happens to other people. I presume if you come from a snowy area you will have some sympathy with this idea that water is ridiculously heavy and can be really inconvenient.

Water disperses heat. I'd like to think this is why there are so few water magi around. I think House Flambeau hunted them down and immolated them. In my own game Aquam counterspells are really effective against Ignem. A Aquam spell of the same magnitude, plus one added Size, sucks up all the heat of an Ignem spell. Water that has the same effect at a lower volume is slightly unnatural.

Water is coherent and adherent. Slightly unnatural water that was more coherent than normal water doesn't part, which lets you use some of the other properties more destructively. Adherence allows water to stick to things. Turning water into glue is only slightly unnatural. It's the stickiness of water that makes it coat objects. You could drown someone with quite a small amount of water, merely by making it particularly adherent. Similarly, in many parts of Mythic Europe, it's so cold that if you can keep an opponent wet you don't really have to do much more to kill them.

Water has high surface tension compared to other liquids. This means that it's not difficult to make water that you can walk on, for example. Similarly if you make water which is highly coherent and not particularly adherent, you'd have a particularly smooth surface, which you could use for sliding objects or for skating quickly. The surface tension of water creates capillary action. That's where water appears to defy gravity by crawling up the sides of things. Water with a very high surface tension would be able to crawl over barriers.

To move on to the concept of ice: ice is unusual in that it's a solid that is larger than the same weight of the equivalent liquid. Ice floats because it displaces sufficient water: most solids don't do this. A slightly unnatural liquid would be one that created an enormous amount of ice for a small amount of liquid. One of the ways that permeable rock is broken down into tillable soil is via frost. The water in rocks freezes and expands, cracking them slightly. The next frost, more water having filled the crack, it is stretched even wider. Eventually this turns the rock into gravel, then sand. A spell can make this process more rapid, by freezing and melting the water many times each hour. Ice can also be used as a construction material, particularly if you create ice that melts at an unnaturally high temperature. It is particularly good for boat making.

Water doesn't compress very much, which is very important in the creation of hydraulic power transmissions. That is: a great deal of power can be forced through a column of water, if the column of water can be contained. In real-world machines the problem is containing that pressure. In Mythic Europe, magic itself provides the containment mechanism. This means that contained units of water (remembering that it is heavy and coherent) can be used much like rock or metal.

So to revise. Water is a solvent. It is adherent and coherent. This creates capillary action. Water forms ice. Water is great at trapping heat and has a high heat of vaporization. Water is heavy and it does not compress. These features, taken to an extreme, are defining characteristics of slightly unnatural water

Strange Stories

from a Chinese Studio

Strange Stories From a Chinese Studio: Volume One was the ten thousandth free audiobook recorded by Librivox.

One of the reasons I'm fascinated with Chinese folktales is that towards the end of the *Ars Magica* setting, we started to run out of things that people hadn't seen before and so to cheat we would harvest other peoples' folktales and add them into the European setting. For example there is a Japanese spirit, a sort of faceless person, that I stole for Antagonists. I first became aware of *Strange Stories From a Chinese Studio* a couple of years ago and I deliberately decided not to read it, because it had too much good material and I was busy working through other research for what became the North African and Egyptian books.

Chinese Studio is a series of short folk tales. The person who's telling them appears to believe that they are the truth, which means that sometimes they end abruptly in the same way that, sometimes, when you read biographies the person is heroic up until a certain point and then the life just seems to taper away. In these stories something amusing or amazing happens and then that's it. Done. The stories have also, in this edition, been bolded within an inch of their lives. I'm not saying that Giles, who did the translation, was incredibly sex averse, but he was a Victorian gentleman writing for other Victorian gentlemen and he used a vast degree of inventiveness to remove anything vaguely erotic from the stories. Many of the stories deal with people who have fairy or fox wives, because this is a Chinese studio, but let's ignore those that now.

One of the early stories, and one of my favourites, involves a man who goes blind because a film forms over the pupil of each of his eyes. Trapped as he is in darkness, he starts hearing voices and he presumes he is going insane. It becomes clear to him that talking creatures are living inside his eyeballs and they have become disconsolate because they haven't seen the sunlight in a while. They crawl out of his nose and go on an adventure. They then climb back up his nose, and talk to each other about how the man's garden has been neglected since he's gone blind. When he confronts his wife about this, her reaction confirms to him that these are not symptoms of madness. Actual spiritual beings have taken up residence in his head.

After many nights of this one of the creatures becomes sick of all this climbing up noses and decides to create a door. It tries to split open the film in the front of the eye. It fails to do this but it encourages the other creature to try. It manages to break open the film in the front of the eye, allowing the man to see again.

The two creatures in his eyes have a discussion. The one from the blind eye agrees to come and live with the other, leading to another quick trip down one nostril and up the other. From that day the man had two pupils in his right eye, which allowed him to see more clearly than any other man despite being blinded in his left.

It's not clear what the game effects of having these speaking creatures in your eyes are. An awesome knack involving the Awareness ability? If they are faeries, he might gain certain short term skills, or the premonitions Virtue, due to his eyes discussing things which are invisible to him.

It's not clear whether this is meant to be a horror story. Are you meant to think "Wait a minute! I have pupils! Are people in everyone's pupils? Tiny men sitting behind windows?" Giles the translator claims that: yes! This is exactly what you meant to think. He believes all Chinese people believe that there are little human-shaped figures in the back of their eyeballs, a superstition which is caused by seeing your own reflection, reflected off of a mirror into your eyeballs, then back on to the mirror. Ancient Chinese body horror? Hard to tell.

Another story I particularly like is about an elderly woman who has one son, and this son is taken by tiger. A passing monk rebukes the tiger/ "Just how is this woman to live now that you've eaten her son? This is entirely inappropriate behavior." The tiger adopts the woman and starts leaving dead deer on her porch. Each day another deer. Eventually the woman starts to feel more friendly toward the tiger and she coaxes it to sleep on her veranda. The woman is quite rich by this time, because a deer each day is quite something when you live in medieval China, and no one wants to burgle her house because there's literally a tiger lying across the doorway. Eventually she and the tiger become such great friends that it wanders around carrying things for her, to get her shopping: those sorts of things. Eventually the widow dies, the tiger bursts into her house, and mourns her death.

I quite like this idea that a saint has accidentally put an incredibly dangerous creature into the middle of the town. It does nothing particularly scary, except camp out on the veranda of an old woman. I wonder how this would play in Mythic Europe where poaching deer is illegal. Elderly women who had suspicious seeming cats were sometimes accused of being witches...

...well actually that's after our period/ In 1220 people didn't believe that witches really existed. They believed people who thought they were witches were mentally ill...

but leaving that aside: what can you do if a saint has accidentally handed a woman a tiger, or perhaps in Mythic Europe, a great wolf. You could just wait and after she passes away, then you have a mystical tiger available. You could adopt it as a familiar. You could see if there is something particular to the woman. Perhaps she has the virtue that makes animals particularly friendly. If so she may prove a resource when dealing with similar creatures, particularly given the way that most animals react to magi.

There is a story in which a character asks for his fortune to be told. The magician in the marketplace says "You're going to die very quickly that I can prevent it from happening with one of my charms." The person refuses the assistance of the necromancer, so the necromancer sends spirits to kill the man. The necromancer wants to maintain his reputation. for seeing the future.

Of particular interest to have magi is the story of a tiger spirit which only attacks scholars. It seems to eat at least one every year. The spirit of the scholar most recently killed is forced to serve the tiger until a new scholar dies. In the story the ghost of one of the scholars contacts a friend, and gets him to trick a teacher, whom they both disliked, into coming to the mountain of the tiger.

When I saw this I was reminded of the tradition found in British folk tales of what's called a fag corpse, fag, in this sense, meaning "servant". The idea is that the ghost of the last person buried in the graveyard becomes the servant of the other ghosts while there. Rich people would make very sure that directly after the funeral of their relative was a second funeral, preferably of a peasant. That meant the relative of the rich people would only have to serve the wishes of the poor people nearby for a matter of moments.

There is also mention of a poisonous plant. Whoever eats this plant dies and becomes a ghost: their final business being that they cannot rest until they have poisoned someone else using the plant. One of the poison victims, a gentleman of strong moral character, chooses not to poison anyone else. He continues his worldly works and supports his mother, until eventually the various immortals notice what he's doing. He is given a role in the celestial bureaucracy, and takes the curse with him when he passes from the world. This reminded me of the oldest of the ghosts at the Cave of Twisting Shadows. In Sanctuary of Ice, there is mention of a woman who poisoned herself, her worldly business being to wait for the return of Criamon.

In another story there is a magic rock, which has many tiny grottoes. Each year, one grotto closes. The person who owns the rock can tell how long they're going to live. There are certain dryads linked not to trees but individual flowers. There are western magicians who are able to stretch and extend their limbs in a way that reminded me of Mr Tickle and Mr Fantastic.

There is mention of the nation of flying heads. In this kingdom people's heads fly off and go down to the marshy lands to eat worms, and it's considered completely normal by the people who live there. There are similar magicians in Hungry they can sever parts of the bodies and send them off travelling, but none of them actually has a flying head.

There is the story of a man who was swept out to sea, and lands on the island of the cannibals. He manages to avoid being eaten by showing them how to cook meat and eventually, to keep him happy, they give him a troglodyte wife. They have two sons and he eventually escapes to the mainland. His children have magic blood and they rise high in the army. His wife is absolutely hideous, so she refuses to go to China until it becomes clear that her sons have become generals and her husband a high official. Regardless of her hideous visage, everyone around her husband is required to treat her as though she were attractive. This does not so far as I can tell actually make her attractive, although that would be an interesting outcome to the folk story.

Strange Stories From a Chinese Studio is an interesting grab bag of material from which you can steal a great deal of campaign material. In this broadcast, I've covered the first volume of the book. I believe it's 5 volumes long.

THE FALL OF BABBULKUND

In one of Lord Dunsany's stories, a merchant caravan pauses in the desert. They ask a man in rags to join them at the fire, and offer him food and drink. He tells them stories of the luxuries of the city to which they travel: ancient Babbulkund. In time they leave him behind, but because of his ceaseless tramping, the man in rags catches up with them, and they have another evening of stories of Babbulkund.

When they meet the ragged man a third time, he is deeply distressed. He confides in them.

'I AM THE SERVANT OF THE LORD THE GOD OF MY PEOPLE, AND I GO TO DO HIS WORK ON BABBULKUND.

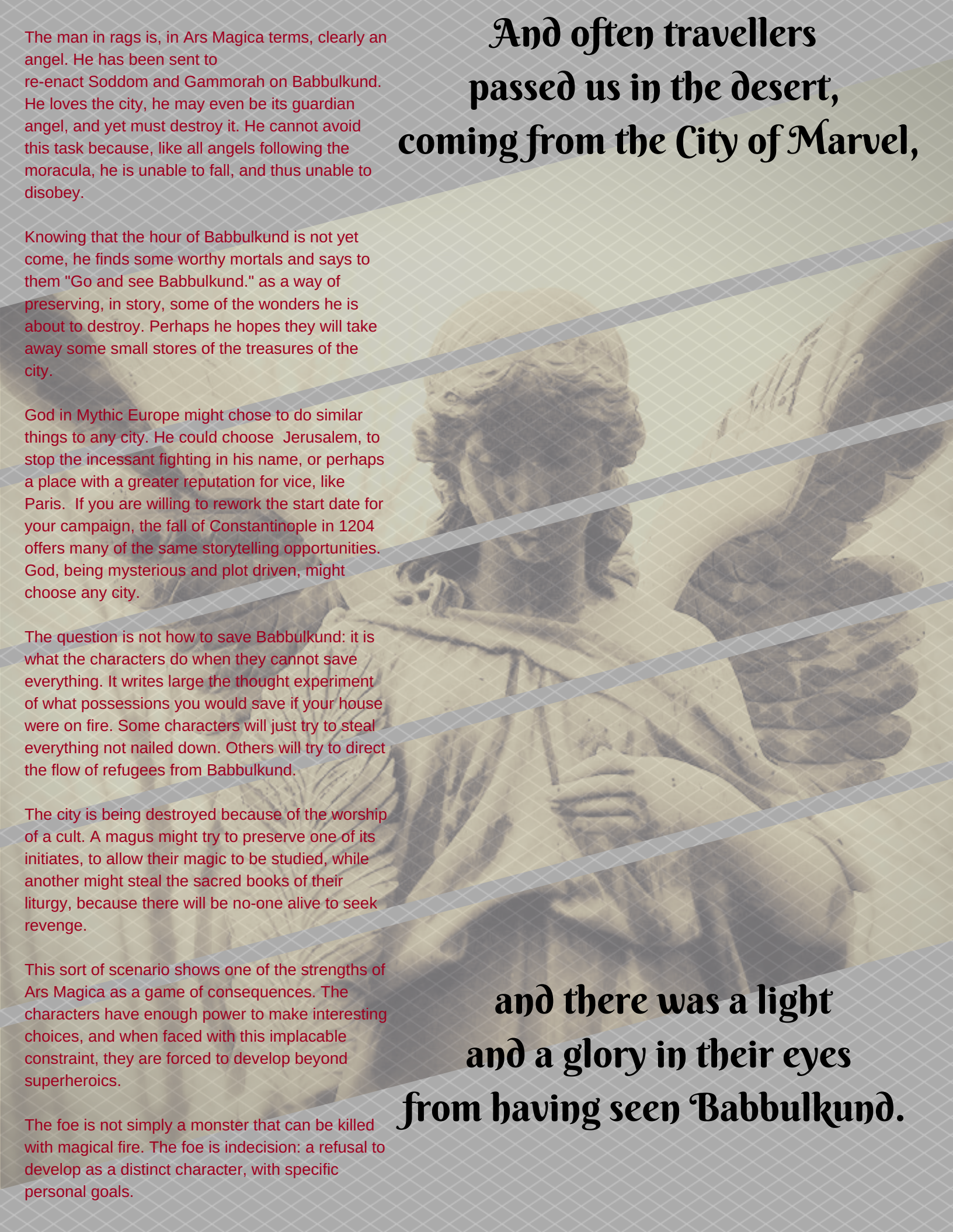
SHE IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CITY IN THE WORLD; THERE HATH BEEN NONE LIKE HER, EVEN THE STARS OF GOD GO ENVIOUS OF HER BEAUTY. SHE IS ALL WHITE, YET WITH STREAKS OF PINK THAT PASS THROUGH HER STREETS AND HOUSES LIKE FLAMES IN THE WHITE MIND OF A SCULPTOR, LIKE DESIRE IN PARADISE. SHE HATH BEEN CARVED OF OLD OUT OF A HOLY HILL, NO SLAVES WROUGHT THE CITY OF MARVEL, BUT ARTISTS TOILING AT THE WORK THEY LOVED. THEY TOOK NO PATTERN FROM THE HOUSES OF MEN, BUT EACH MAN WROUGHT WHAT HIS INNER EYE HAD SEEN AND CARVED IN MARBLE THE VISIONS OF HIS DREAM. ALL OVER THE ROOF OF ONE OF THE PALACE CHAMBERS WINGED LIONS FLIT LIKE BATS, THE SIZE OF EVERY ONE IS THE SIZE OF THE LIONS OF GOD, AND THE WINGS ARE LARGER THAN ANY WING CREATED; THEY ARE ONE ABOVE THE OTHER MORE THAN A MAN CAN NUMBER, THEY ARE ALL CARVEN OUT OF ONE BLOCK OF MARBLE, THE CHAMBER ITSELF IS HOLLOWED FROM IT, AND IT IS BORNE ALOFT UPON THE CARVEN BRANCHES OF A GROVE OF CLUSTERED TREE-FERNS WROUGHT BY THE HAND OF SOME JUNGLE MASON THAT LOVED THE TALL FERN WELL. OVER THE RIVER OF MYTH, WHICH IS ONE WITH THE WATERS OF FABLE, GO BRIDGES, FASHIONED LIKE THE WISTERIA TREE AND LIKE THE DROOPING LABURNUM, AND A HUNDRED OTHERS OF WONDERFUL DEVICES, THE DESIRE OF THE SOULS OF MASONS A LONG WHILE DEAD. OH! VERY BEAUTIFUL IS WHITE BABBULKUND, VERY BEAUTIFUL SHE IS, BUT PROUD; AND THE LORD THE GOD OF MY PEOPLE HATH SEEN HER IN HER PRIDE, AND LOOKING TOWARDS HER HATH SEEN THE PRAYERS OF NEHEMOTH GOING UP TO THE ABOMINATION ANNOLITH AND ALL THE PEOPLE FOLLOWING AFTER VOTH. SHE IS VERY BEAUTIFUL, BABBULKUND; ALAS THAT I MAY NOT BLESS HER. I COULD LIVE ALWAYS ON ONE OF HER INNER TERRACES LOOKING ON THE MYSTERIOUS JUNGLE IN HER MIDST AND THE HEAVENWARD FACES OF THE ORCHIDS THAT, CLAMBERING FROM THE DARKNESS, BEHOLD THE SUN.

I COULD LOVE BABBULKUND WITH A GREAT LOVE, YET AM I THE SERVANT OF THE LORD THE GOD OF MY PEOPLE, AND THE KING HATH SINNED UNTO THE ABOMINATION ANNOLITH, AND THE PEOPLE LUST EXCEEDINGLY FOR VOTH. ALAS FOR THEE, BABBULKUND, ALAS THAT I MAY NOT EVEN NOW TURN BACK, FOR TOMORROW I MUST PROPHECY AGAINST THEE AND CRY OUT AGAINST THEE, BABBULKUND. BUT YE TRAVELLERS THAT HAVE ENTREATED ME HOSPITABLY, RISE AND PASS ON WITH YOUR CAMELS, FOR I CAN TARRY NO LONGER, AND I GO TO DO THE WORK ON BABBULKUND OF THE LORD THE GOD OF MY PEOPLE.

GO NOW AND SEE THE BEAUTY OF BABBULKUND BEFORE I CRY OUT AGAINST HER, AND THEN FLEE SWIFTLY NORTHWARDS.'

The man walks off into the darkness.

The merchants are delayed in their travel and arrive to where Babbulkund should be, to find the old man in rags sitting in the empty desert, his tear-stained face obscured by his hands.



And often travellers passed us in the desert, coming from the City of Marvel,

The man in rags is, in Ars Magica terms, clearly an angel. He has been sent to re-enact Sodom and Gammorah on Babbulkund. He loves the city, he may even be its guardian angel, and yet must destroy it. He cannot avoid this task because, like all angels following the moracula, he is unable to fall, and thus unable to disobey.

Knowing that the hour of Babbulkund is not yet come, he finds some worthy mortals and says to them "Go and see Babbulkund." as a way of preserving, in story, some of the wonders he is about to destroy. Perhaps he hopes they will take away some small stores of the treasures of the city.

God in Mythic Europe might chose to do similar things to any city. He could choose Jerusalem, to stop the incessant fighting in his name, or perhaps a place with a greater reputation for vice, like Paris. If you are willing to rework the start date for your campaign, the fall of Constantinople in 1204 offers many of the same storytelling opportunities. God, being mysterious and plot driven, might choose any city.

The question is not how to save Babbulkund: it is what the characters do when they cannot save everything. It writes large the thought experiment of what possessions you would save if your house were on fire. Some characters will just try to steal everything not nailed down. Others will try to direct the flow of refugees from Babbulkund.

The city is being destroyed because of the worship of a cult. A magus might try to preserve one of its initiates, to allow their magic to be studied, while another might steal the sacred books of their liturgy, because there will be no-one alive to seek revenge.

This sort of scenario shows one of the strengths of Ars Magica as a game of consequences. The characters have enough power to make interesting choices, and when faced with this implacable constraint, they are forced to develop beyond superheroics.

The foe is not simply a monster that can be killed with magical fire. The foe is indecision: a refusal to develop as a distinct character, with specific personal goals.

and there was a light and a glory in their eyes from having seen Babbulkund.