
The Cathedral And The Bizarre - Or - Oh, Doctor Bi Sheng!

by Andrew Oakley for Grand Tribunal UK 2012

A short 2-hour investigative thriller campaign for the Ars Magica roleplaying game, that revolves around a huge historical "What if..?"

Overview

Once a provincial capital, Quimper is now just another nondescript estuary port of no particular note in the newly unified Duchy of Brittany (north-western France). It isn't near any great fields of megaliths, and the magical Black Mountains are some distance away. Its cathedral is so-so. And there certainly haven't been any particularly remarkable magi from the area.

So why is a breathless redcap panicking about a plethora of cheap magical books? On sale in the fish market, no less! More importantly, if the rumours are true, how can you stop the spread of these secrets before the mundanes do something stupid? You'd better nip this in the bud before your hard-earned power is completely devalued.

Requirements

2-8 Ars Magica player characters of any level, magi or grogs. You can bring one of your existing characters, or you can pick up a fresh ready-made character. This campaign was designed with Ars Magica 5th Edition in mind and should fit into the mythos of the Lion and the Lily sourcebook.

This is primarily a investigative / political thriller so don't worry too much about magical or combat skills. If you have them, you will probably get an opportunity to use them; but if you don't, you're unlikely to miss out. There are lots of ways through locked doors, and many ways to find secrets.

Your character must be able to converse in basic Breton or Norman French in order to make the game playable. If you already have any of the Gaelic languages then you can take Breton at two-thirds of that skill (round up). If you don't have, or qualify for, Breton, you may take Norman French at level I for free. Alternatively, the local Covenant of Cournaille will provide a grog to translate for you, if your character can't quite bear the thought of bringing herself down to the common level.

You start at breakfast in the Taverne de Rohan, a large inn in Quimper known to be friendly to magi, just as a redcap rushes in with some urgent news. Ideally you should come up with a one-sentence reason as to why your character is in Brittany. For example, you might be on your way to the megaliths seventy miles further south; or this might be a convenient stop-over before or after an Atlantic voyage; or maybe you're visiting a friend - or is it business? - in the local Covenant of Cournaille.

Start: The redcap bursts in

At the breakfast table in Rohan Tavern, Quimper, summer.

The magi have been placed around one very large rectangular table in a discreet corner of the room. The table has been laid out such that the magi are spread out around the table rather than being crammed in elbow-to-elbow. Whoever laid this table knows that magi value their personal space. There is no place setting at the head of the table, all the magi are treated with equal respect.

Bobbius the Redcap bursts in, and apologises for interrupting the magi. He has been sent on instruction from the local Covenant of Cournouaille to respectfully request that all magi in Quimper investigate rumours of cheap magical books, allegedly on sale in the fish market!

The redcap asks if the magi can stop the spread of these secrets before the mundanes do something stupid. He adds, rather less respectfully, that it would be in the best interests of all magi to nip this in the bud before their hard-earned power is completely devalued. If it's true, of course...

As soon as his message is delivered, Bobbius takes his leave. He has other messages to deliver. He departs on a swift riding horse.

Rohan Tavern

The Rohan Tavern is clearly a high-quality establishment focussed on the business trade. The prices are a little above average, but fair given the level of service, and the posh location. The tavern has a fair-sized stables and the rooms are large. Unusually for an inn, all the bedrooms have desks - not dressing tables, desks - this is clearly a businessmen's haunt.

- Leon the Clothier is crumpled in the corner with a hangover. Expensively dressed but scruffy, a middle-aged booze-sodden man who has clearly overslept his job as a cloth trader. He relies on his apprentice to run the shop when he's in the tavern.

- René is a tubby and respectful landlord. Unlike most landlords, he is formal and businesslike, rather than loud and merry. Most landlords don't like magi as they scare off customers, but René has realised a gap in the market. He is well-known to be willing, perhaps even keen, to accommodate magi's unusual habits, and most magi are happy to pay over-the-odds for someone who understands their needs. The Rohan Tavern is in the wealthy part of town, and René also makes good money off rich visiting merchants who are similarly willing to pay a higher rate for larger rooms, privacy, discrete but attentive service and staff who are never surprised by anything.

- Edith, René's wife. A thin middle-aged woman who hums quietly, out-of-tune. She always has a smile and is attentive to customers, but otherwise keeps to herself. She tidies, cleans and dusts compulsively, discreetly slipping in and out between customers to deliver and clear away plates and drinks. She seems to be able to produce a dishcloth from behind her waist as if by magic - and indeed it is an enchanted dishcloth, a gift from a regular customer, that always reappears, clean and folded into the back of her belt, whenever she lets go of it for more than a few seconds. Perception + Awareness 9 to spot the dishcloth.

René and Edith are well used to magi and are not put off by their gift. Leon's slight fear of the gift shows up as annoyance, and his opinion of magi is "know-it-alls know nothing". Leon wants to get one over on magi.

There are no other staff or customers at the tavern at this time of day. A few tradesmen such as butchers and bakers occasionally pop in to drop off their wares, or collect orders. Perception + Folk Ken 9+ to notice that the tavern is important enough to warrant the butchers and bakers themselves to turn up, rather than sending a boy.

Other things the players may notice:

- Leon is keen to tease magi with a hokey myth about a magical fish which reappeared to be eaten daily by the local saint. Rene is keen not to annoy magi (who are good paying customers), and dismisses the drunk's story as nonsense; the rivers are teeming with fish around here, and one fish looks much like another. If the players investigate, they will realise that fish get trapped between the tributary confluences and the estuary tides - the rivers really are teeming with fish here.
- Locals are spreading rumours of an explosion in the craftsmen's quarter. Anyone who gets Perception + Awareness 12+ will vaguely remember some kind of distant thunderclap waking them up in the night, but it wasn't as loud as the rumours make out. This rumor might arrive at the breakfast table as the baker makes his delivery (Perception + Awareness 6), or the party might hear it whilst out and about. There is also a pillar of black smoke rising from the craftsmen's quarter; Perception + Awareness 9+ to notice that this black smoke is from a building fire, rather than the normal grey smoke of a chimney.

Around town

Noticing the aura

- Magic aura is strongest near upper Odet (1d4+1) (north-eastern end of Astor St), medium at Odet between Jet and Steir (1d4) (Astor St near cloisters and craftsmen's quarter, also Locmaria Alley), lowest at Odet after Steir (1d4-1) (Odet Quay, docks). Elsewhere in town it is detectable, but not in effect. Further upstream, out of town, it is not detectable unless within 10 paces of the Odet riverbank (the confluences and estuary tide concentrate the effect inside the town).
- Perception + Magic Sensitivity, ease factor 6 to detect the direction or approximate location of the aura; ease factor 9 to detect the level of the aura; ease factor 12 to realise it is moving downstream, following the flow of the Odet. Reduce ease factor by 3 if actually inside the aura. If looking at the water in the Odet river itself, ease factor 6 for Magi to perceive shimmering clouds of vis moving mostly downstream in the river. Many, but not all, of the clouds, seem to be centred on particular fish.
- The aura's vis is manifested as gold dust. It is a variety of all forms of vis. In the fish, this is because gold dust is stuck in their guts. Gutting the fish (e.g. for preservation) discards the vis.
- Perception + Awareness 6+ to notice the teeming fish (any fish, not the aura) in the river, if standing within 10 paces of any riverbank.

Magical accidents

Throughout the adventure, a series of ever larger magical accidents (casting botches) occur in the background. Small explosions, minor injuries, building collapses or illusions at first; later, conjuring of exotic creatures that escape and cause havoc, or die malformed in the street; warping of entire buildings or streets; unusual weather effects; mass hallucinations etc

Confirming the rumours

Track down a book; discover that they are low-quality pamphlets of specific magical chapters. This can be done by:

- Going to the fish market and finding the stall
- Investigating rumours of an explosion in the domestic quarter
- Obtaining one from the general public

The fish market

The fish market is open from dawn to midday, every day, in the market square by the Cathedral. Although it is primarily fish, at the far end are a variety of stalls trading in all kinds of items that arrive through the docks, including spices, furs, silks and pottery. On Wednesdays and Sundays, a much larger general market with farm produce happens too; it is up to the storyguide to decide what day of the week it is.

A quick search of the market reveals a silk trader. Sticking out between the rolls of silk is a box of poorly-reproduced pamphlets (easy to spot, no need to roll).

The silk trader will try to shut up shop and leave as soon as he thinks he's dealing with magi (any magus without Gentle Gift who gets within 20 paces). He grabs his handcart of silks and the box, but drops one or two pamphlets in the process. He pushes through the crowd, and even with his handcart he is extremely difficult to follow (difficulty 12 through any method). If he is captured, he will try to grab some silks and run off without the handcart (preventing him running off is difficulty 15). Ultimately he will even abandon his silks in his attempt to escape (difficulty 15 to prevent him slipping away).

Very unusually for a mundane, the silk trader has an extremely high Parma Magica, and any attempt to stop or interrogate him magically will fail, as will all attempts at spellcasting on him. The silk trader is wearing an enchanted kaftan with a Parma Magica of 5 (but they players will not be able to identify this, as it protects itself). The silk trader has no idea how the kaftan works, all he knows is that it does work; he obtained the kaftan in a deal with a sultan.

The silk trader is has a mysterious eastern ethnicity (Perception + Awareness 12); somewhere between Arab and Chinese (he's actually Kashmiri).

The silk trader has dropped a carved oblong bone or ivory with an unknown rune carved in the tip. Strangely the rune is carved outwards, rather than inwards. This is actually ceramic movable type punch, a Chinese glyph, but the concept of movable type is unfamiliar to the characters. An Intelligence + Artes Liberales 9+ is required to identify the glyph as Chinese, but there is no way a European magi could ever work out that it is the glyph for "house" (in any case, it doesn't really matter exactly which glyph it is; the significant point is, it's Chinese).

If captured, the silk trader will jabber in a foreign tongue (Kashmiri), pretend not to speak any European language, and attract the attention of the town guards. When the silk trader gets close to the town guards, he will whisper to the guards (Perception Awareness 15+ to overhear, in Norman French; or magically read the minds of the guards) that he is the guest of the Dean of the cathedral. The guards will insist that he is taken in to their custody "for his own safety" (they will later secretly deliver him to the Dean). If the players attempt to intervene with the town guards, the storyguide must remind the players that it would be extremely unwise for magi to get involved in a conflict with the civil authorities. As an absolute last resort, the silk trader will die trying to escape; the silk trader would rather die than be captured by the magi; he expects his treatment under the magi would be far more horrible to bear. He'll even grab a knife or weapon, shout some unintelligible (Moorish?) slogan and commit suicide if there is no way out.

The explosion

The players may investigate rumours of an explosion in the craftsmens' quarter. There's a charred wheelwright, a charred wheelwright's workshop and a charred - but mostly intact and readable - pamphlet.

Other methods of obtaining a pamphlet

The storyguide must encourage the players to obtain a pamphlet. If they don't get one from the market or the exploded wheelwright's shop, then trawling round the local inns, docks or shops might reveal someone who bought one (remember, they would be most likely to be sold to the literate middle-class). They may be persuaded to sell it or hand it over. As a last resort, if the players are completely off-track, have an urchin attempt to sell one to the magi ("You look like wizards. Want to buy my magic book? I found it in the gutter. A gold coin? Too much? Make me an offer! I can haggle!").

The pamphlets

The pamphlets are spells, translated into Norman French. Normally, a mundane would not be able to cast a spell even if he was literate. However, proximity to the magic aura of the Odet river enables mundanes to cast spells from the pamphlets - very badly. The aura areas are along the river Odet; north-eastern end of Astor St (strongest), Astor St near cloisters and craftsmen's quarter (medium), the central part of Locmaria Alley (medium), and finally the docks at Odet Quay (lowest).

Almost all attempts at spellcasting by the mundanes using the pamphlets, end in spectacular botches. Few attempts merely "fail to go off"; the vast majority botch in interesting ways.

Each pamphlet contains instructions for one spell. The instructions have been badly translated into Norman French from well-known Hermetic books. Intelligence + Latin 9+ will reveal that the translation has an air of the Church about it; the translations use religious phrasing that is at odds with how a magi might phrase it in Hermetic terms.

The paper is low-grade parchment, the kind used for tuition or simple prayer-books. The source for the parchment can only be the copiers at the cathedral. The pamphlet consists of two sheets of these low-grade parchments, folded in half and given three or four simple stitches at the spine to form an 8-page pamphlet.

The parchment is holy and carries a holy aura. The parchment is a part of the Church. Attempts to use magic upon it, are met with the same disability as if casting inside Quimper Cathedral itself (aura -3). The GM may simply use this as a plot device to prevent any magic being performed upon the parchment or pamphlets. However, characters can hold on to it whilst casting spells (so long as the spell isn't actually cast upon the pamphlet). The dean has placed some kind of blessing that enables the parchment, despite the aura, to hold magical knowledge. This is a McGuffin, a plot device to enable the story to work; the dean will not reveal how he did it, even on pain of death.

There are a couple of small rune-like symbols on the bottom of the back page of the pamphlet. These are Chinese letters. A visit to the docks will soon confirm the recent arrival of an Eastern silk trader with an ink-stained wooden chest who asked to be taken to the dean at the cathedral. Silk traders - ones from the Far East itself anyway - are not common in this part of the world; silk is usually a traded commodity, sold through a distribution chain in these extreme western edges of Europe.

The spells

The pamphlet spells are mostly low level. They include:

Palm of Flame - botches create a small explosion

Beast of Outlandish Size - botches grow some body parts but not others, creating horrific but mundane animals who thrash out in pain

Touch of Midas - a botch fills the street with nuggets of purest green

Vision of the Haunting Spirits - botches turn living people into ghosts

Image Phantom - objects, walls, even whole buildings, appear bent into warped shapes

Phantasm of the Talking Head - botches show twisted demonic faces shouting angry gibberish

Phantasmal Animal - botches show deformed fantastical beasts which react angrily to everything

Confrontation at the Cathedral

Gaining entrance

The main body of the cathedral is open to all. However, the cloisters, crypt and other antechambers are locked with simple keys.

- The Bishop Henri of Quimper is a busy man, but old, kind and not put off by the gift. Canons Elbas and Portrain are similarly gentle, although gifted characters do make them uncomfortable in the normal manner (except for Gentle Gifted). They make time for the players but they do not directly control the monks and scribes. They direct the players to Dean Langonnet regarding all matters to do with books. If pressed for an opinion, the Bishop and the Canons all admit that they find the Dean rather over-zealous and strict. If there were anyone who is *too* Christian, it's the Dean, they muse wistfully.
- The printing outfit is in the crypt. This is accessed through a locked, sturdy oak door in the transept (the "wings" of the main body of the cathedral), and down some stone stairs. Perception + Awareness 9+ only if specifically searching the transept (ease factor 17 if merely generally searching the whole cathedral), to notice drips of ink leading to the door. The silk trader will be hiding down there too.
- The monks refuse the players entry to the cloisters and the monks' rooms off the cloisters (which includes the scribes' rooms). The players can try to sneak in somehow. Remember the Cathedral has a -3 casting aura, so a physical approach may be the only option.
- Dean Langonnet is in charge of the monks and scribes. He denies all involvement with the pamphlets. He hates magi; he thinks they are peddlers of cheap tricks who use their secret knowledge only for the advantage of the magi. If the magi were good Christians, they would share out their secrets for the benefit of all mankind, he says.
- The scribes know about the printing press. They will try to help the players, but are torn between their fear of the magi and their fear of the authority of the Dean. Braver scribes may try to speak to the magi as they move around the Cathedral to collect supplies. They fear for their jobs- the printing press could reproduce their holy works just as easily as spell books. Scribe Morgan is particularly keen to form an alliance with the magi.
- Destroy the printing kit and ensure the secret of movable type does not get out. Ensure the Dean and the silk trader are not able to spread the idea any further.

Points to remember

- The Chinese glyph punches are made from hard-fired porcelain that is extremely hard-wearing. The secret of porcelain manufacture is not known in Europe. Some of the richer or higher-status characters may know what porcelain looks like. The secrets of porcelain manufacture are NOT part of the deal (the silk trader doesn't know how to make porcelain); all the European letter punches are a variety of bone, ivory or hardwood (they are experimenting) and are not so hard wearing. The European letter punches cannot be carved with such detail and give fuzzy, smudged print; the punches also deteriorate slowly after a few score copies.
- The magical chapters reproduced in the pamphlets have been translated by the monk scribes into Norman French, making them accessible to a far larger audience than a regular Latin magical book. Nevertheless, literacy is not a common skill and only middle-class people would be able to make use of the pamphlets. Remember, the church does not consider magic to be sacred, they consider it to be a challenge to the authority of the church.

Debrief

The silk trader sold the idea of moveable type printing from China to the dean. The dean believed he could bring about the downfall of the magi by making their magic common knowledge. He did not believe that the magic would be as powerful as it turned out to be, as he did not take into consideration the flow of vis from the Black Mountains along the river Odet.

Postscript

Hopefully this scenario will have raised some questions in the players' minds about whether the Order of Hermes is out to benefit only its members, and perhaps make the players consider how they could play their characters in future for the benefit of all citizens of Mythic Europe.

- Bi Sheng

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bi_Sheng

Bi Sheng (990-1051AD) was the inventor of moveable type between 1041 and 1048 in Song Dynasty China. His system used hard-fired porcelain punches.

- The Cathedral And The Bazaar

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_cathedral_and_the_bazaar

<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/>

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"The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary" is an essay by free software advocate Eric S Raymond. In it, he promotes the public sharing of computer program source code between programmers, to allow others to find faults in the programs, and to allow programmers to learn from each other. He calls this model of intellectual property sharing "the bazaar" (market), and contrasts it to the "cathedral" model of keeping secrets which, he argues, is the root of many software faults.

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