A Bibiliographic Essay Regarding Ars Magica

By David M. Perry

As a medieval historian, I have one core message for everyone who wants to play around in the imaginary Middle Ages: Whatever it is that you want to imagine, it's fine. History can back you up.

The European Middle Ages have long been depicted as especially brutal, ignorant, isolated, homogeneous, bigoted, and whatever other "dark ages" stereotypes you can come up with. When it comes to fantasy gaming (and fiction), history is often deployed as a check on creativity, a way to tell gamers that their ideas around travel, race, gender, sexuality, science, faith (or lack thereof), etc. aren't realistic. And while one easy retort is that a world in which dragons are real means we no longer have to be concerned with actual history, it's much more fun to root our fantasy settings in as much history as possible. To let history say "yes" to our best and most innovative ideas. So it's good news that the real history of the Middle Ages can provide details and inspiration for settings and scenarios across Europe, the Mediterranean, and beyond.

Want Vikings in Baghdad? Done.

Want information (secrets, rumors, philosophy) to travel from Iran to Egypt to Iberia? Done.

Want women with swords? Done.

Want stories of astral projection across time and space? Done.

Want both manuscripts imbued with secret knowledge and written in code? Done.

You already knew about nobles and war, but did you know that medieval people routinely practiced democracy? Well, now you do.

When Matthew Gabriele and I wrote _The Bright Ages_, we wanted to write a book that could be a first stop for people wanting to know more, but never wanted it to be the last stop. So we wrote a historiographical essay for each of our various chapters, featuring works that we thought might be a good next stop. All of these books that follow are also good next stops, waystations on your journey, and perhaps particularly useful fleshing out your own saga for the **Ars Magica roleplaying game**.

Medieval European and Mediterranean societies were more or less patriarchal in structure, but it's easy to find women exercising agency and independence in political, intellectual, economic, and military contexts wherever and whenever you look. Start with Eleanor Janega's _The Once and Future Sex: Going Medieval on Women's Roles in Society_, a new book that not only is a great read

grounded in telling true stories about the complexities of medieval women's lives, but will guide you into the next set of readings for whatever sub-topic might help you flesh out the character of your choice. And by the way, it turns out that men also have gender and that it was complicated. Read _From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe_, by Ruth Karras, especially the bits (if you want to base your campaign out of a university) on students.

Speaking of students, medieval people did study and knew a lot about math, history, language, music, and more. They practiced science, built machines, and studied the natural world, so every would-be mage should read _The Light Ages: The Surprising History of Medieval Science_, by Seb Falk. If you want to have a character who believes the world is flat, go ahead, but know that most medieval people understood that the world was round. Anthony Bale's _A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages: The World Through Medieval Eyes_ reveals reveals how medieval people saw the world and their place in it. Medieval people understood themselves to be connected to a broader complicated world, which doesn't just mean that your characters can travel, but that even when holding still, all too often the world comes knocking on your door. There's a key moment in my next book, _Oathbreakers_, in which warring brothers are suddenly reminded about the bigger problems outside their borders, as a Byzantine embassy arrives, Vikings raid in the northwest, and North African Muslims raid in the south. (Spoiler alert! The brothers choose peace in a hurry.)

But you're **Ars Magica** players and don't need to limit yourself to medieval history books aimed at broad public audiences — No shade meant! That's what I write these days. — because more specialized scholarship has answers to questions you might not even have thought of yet. These books are more expensive, but are worth seeking through your local library, used book shop, or wherever you might find such tomes of wisdom.

Here are just three scholarly books, all focused on North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, the nearest frontier where European characters might go for trade, crusade, exile, or more. _Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker_ by Sarah Strousma takes us to Saladin's Egypt, following the life of the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides. If I was

looking for a great historical figure to make a mage, I might start there. Kristina Richardson, in _Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, Migration_, found a group of people called "The Strangers" in the medieval Islamic world, and shows how they developed their own language, their own sense of culture, and most critically for us, systems of magic. They also did a lot of block print publishing of horoscopes and brought that technology to central Europe just before Gutenberg unveiled his printing press. A lot of the book is focused on language, specifically, but skim through those parts to find the magic. Finally, when you take to the road to explore this big medieval world, you're gonna need a place to stay. _Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World: Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages_ by Olivia Remie Constable reveals the history of the funduq, institutions designed to host wayfarers in foreign lands.

I was a gamer long before I became a medieval historian, but as a historian, I know our medieval roleplaying games can take place in a bigger, more knowable, and (best of all) more human world.

Find out more about the Ars Magica RPG
ATLAS-GAMES.COM/ARSMAGICA