

Reworking the Normandy Tribunal Tournament

The Ars Magica 5th edition Normandy Tribunal sourcebook, *The Lion and the Lily*, introduces an interesting idea: that in the Normandy Tribunal, a kind of magical tournament is held. This tournament is held alongside the seven-yearly Tribunal Meeting, which by local custom is hosted at a different (randomly chosen) covenant each time. And to the victors of the tourney go seven years of access to their choice of the spoils of the Tribunal (vis sites, books, etc.).

This is a wonderful example of the Order adapting to, absorbing and reflecting the culture of its local setting. In this case, this reflects the tendency for ruling courts to be itinerant, often imposing huge costs on its hosts (though in this case it is a Tribunal Meeting imposing costs on the host covenant, not the king imposing costs on nobles); it reflects the pageantry of emerging feudal courts; and it reflects the institution of the tournament. That is brilliant – an original set of “Mythic” ideas derived imaginatively from real history. But there are problems with the implementation of the idea.

The first problem is that for a storyguide, the Tribunal Tournament *as written* is a headache. If the players want their characters to compete then the storyguide has to run a half-dozen separate tourney events, which presumably means working out how all other attendees might stack up in the events before playing through some long and grindy battles. And while the supplement states that the tournament prizes grant access to vis sites, the supplement doesn't actually list the sites but instead gives a rather flat and flavourless mathematical way to gain vis-rights; this seems disappointing for players and storyguides who like magical sites to have plenty of flavour, but actually writing up a full list of all available sites (for a whole tribunal) would be an enormous headache.

And secondly, arguably the whole institution, *as written*, is flawed. It is highly likely that young magi (as most players' characters are) would have no chance of success in the tourney: consider the difference in power between a 30 year old mage and a 100 year old mage, consider that the 100 year old mage probably also has a pack-full of enchanted devices to further skew the odds, consider that the domus magna of Tylalus is in the tribunal (and what you might call “cheating” they would probably call “a fun challenge”), consider that teams can enter from outside the tribunal (for a fee that would be excessive for junior magi, but would seem a bargain investment for teams of veteran magi such as Hoplites), and suddenly the whole idea seems to be, instead of an interesting challenge for the players' characters, just a means to concentrate all of the power in the tribunal in the hands of a few much-more-powerful magi while also giving the tribunal a huge “balance of trade” problem with outsiders gaining rare vis resources. That is no fun for players, and sounds like a bad deal for the Tribunal as a whole.

What this document does is to provide an alternative way to handle the whole Tribunal

and Tournament system, building on the original excellent idea in a way that is fun for players, viable for their characters, and manageable for storyguides – perhaps even throwing up some interesting story ideas along the way.

Customs of the Normandy Tribunal

Random Hosts

The Tribunal Meeting is held at a random covenant in the Tribunal, chosen by lot at the end of the previous meeting. (This is much as per the official source book.)

Possible story interest: What if the chosen covenant is financially poor, and fears being bankrupted by having to host the event? With a few years to go before the meeting, they have come to the conclusion that they just can't afford to host, and so they decline the honour. Can they do that? Nobody ever has before. House Guernicus characters who like lawyering may want to weigh in on the legalities here. But then, suddenly, the poor covenant changes its mind? Now they have found an anonymous sponsor. They refuse to say who it is (or their sponsor demands that they lie). The characters could be tasked by House Guernicus to investigate this. How do the characters investigate this (and do they have to do it without scrying, since no crime has been committed)? Who is behind this? (Would the other magi of the Tribunal accept it if a powerful mudane lord, or a covenant in another Tribunal, were using this to gain influence over proceedings? And what would the sponsor actually want?) Do the characters get some leverage by uncovering but covering up again a secret, or do they expose the covenant's dubious schemes and so earn their enmity?

Grand Processions and Spectacles

The custom has developed that in the week before the Tribunal, the attendees arrive with as much pomp and spectacle as they can – much like noble lords would do when trying to impress with the magnificence of their households. Each covenant's attendees parade into the area where they will be lodged, marching around it, often with music and flamboyant displays (e.g. of Imagonem magics), with everyone in their finest robes or most intimidating armour. In the days following this, many covenants vie to put on spectacles to impress and to flaunt their power, ranging from philosophical lectures to demonstrations of Verditius artefacts to programmes of storytelling, and more.

Possible story interest: (1) A rival covenant's parade is led by an illusion of a giant flying insect the size of an elephant, which menaces other attendees. Irritated, another powerful mage creates an illusion of a bird which swoops in and eats the wasp; the new arrivals retaliate with an illusion of a giant hawk, which swoops on the bird; the older mage creates an illusion of an archer which shoots the hawk... meanwhile another

spectator Imagonems an illusion of an applauding crowd.... An informal, spectacular and (mostly) good natured display of Imagonem expertise is in the offing. Do the players' characters seek to muster up illusions of their own to win the admiration (or derision) of their peers? **(2)** In the days before the meeting, a rival covenant stages a series of satirical plays which glorify that covenant's exploits while mocking other magi, including the players' characters. How do the characters react to plays publicly mocking them? **(3)** The night after the tribunal, a drunken mage jeers "once again, the minstrel who accompanies me has proved himself to be far finer than any of yours! It is always thus! My minstrel is the best! I'd pay a purse of vis to anyone who is served by a better minstrel - because I know that there is none better!" Do the characters rise to the challenge? They have seven years to plan on how to field a more impressive minstrel at the next Meeting. **(4)** In the run up to the next Tribunal a freshly-Gauntletted Jerbiton mage approaches the characters. She wants to make a real impression at her first Tribunal Meeting, but is not wealthy. She offers something the characters would want (e.g. a copy of a fine book) if they will craft for her (e.g. an enchanted artefact) a truly spectacular cloak or something else that will make her appear glorious beyond her actual abilities when she parades in before the next Tribunal meeting.

The Tournaments

(This is completely different to the official source book.)

First, in the three days before the Tribunal Meeting, anyone attending the Tribunal – whether as actual attendees from the Normandy Tribunal's covenants, or as guest visitors from other Tribunals – may make a challenge, or may accept a challenge. The protocol is that any attendee announces (usually by way of a herald, speaking out at dinner and/or touring the camp/lodging areas) what they are offering, and what the nature of the challenge will be. Anybody who wishes then publicly announces that they are willing to accept the challenge. Then the issuer of the challenge either agrees or rejects the acceptance. It is important that whoever issued the challenge is not obliged to take on all-comers – that way powerful magi cannot trample on youngsters. However, if a mage does agree to compete against someone far more experienced or renowned than they are, this is considered impressively valorous, and if an underdog defeats a superior then they will gain reputation. Challenges may be individual, or team-based. By convention team-based challenges tend to require five participants per team, and as some covenants attend with fewer than five magi it is not unusual for two covenants to join forces, or for a covenant to recruit a lone magus to make up a full team.

Examples of tournament challenges can be taken from the official *Lion and the Lily* source book, but there could be plenty more. Challenges can range from dramatic battles between the mightiest of magi, to simple tests of arms between junior magi or even mundanes. Storyguides might prepare a huge list of these, or can simply hand-wave the Tournaments and say that there is nothing of interest for the characters – this can require as much or as little time as you want in preparation, and can take a whole session or no time at all to play through, with challenges constructed to suit or test the specific

abilities of the characters.

As a few examples:

- A team of three mounted, lance-wielding Flambeau magi and their two finest mundane companions (equipped with magical armour, lances, horses, etc) issue a challenge to a non-lethal joust (blunted lance tips, and Rego Corpus spells to cushion the fall from a horse). They put up a stake of three pawns of Aquam vis, and expect anyone who accepts to put up an “equal” stake (which needn’t mean mathematically equal – they would probably consider one Corpus equal to three Aquam). They will happily take on teams of either magi or mundanes (or a mix), and though they won’t take on absurdly over-powered teams they are very happy to face opponents who seem more powerful than them, as they relish the challenge. They have nine pawns of Aquam with them, so could issue and lose this challenge three times, but they would want the fun of fighting different opponents each time.
- A fresh, young Tremere mage who has just finished her Gauntlet wants to flex her muscles in certamen, and will take on any other mage of similar age and experience in a certamen bout, for a nominal stake of one pawn of Vim vis.
- A Verditius mage with a penchant for archery is attending his second Tribunal. Having just fashioned his second-ever magical bow, he now wants to put up his old bow (a minor but still desirable magical weapon) as a stake, to be wagered against any magical artefact or weapon of minor or moderate power. The challenge is to an archery contest, but as he (correctly) suspects that people might be intimidated by his obvious specialism with bows, to make it more interesting he suggests that he will nominate a mundane archer to shoot for him, against a mundane archer nominated by whoever accepts the challenge; and he suggests that both archers should shoot blindfolded. The use of magics to aid or frustrate arrows’ trajectories, grant sight through the blindfold, obscure the targets, etc., etc., is, of course, encouraged.
- A Tytalus mage issues a team challenge to a giant, silent game of chess. She will craft life-sized chess pieces from lumps of wood, and then her team and whoever accepts the challenge will play. Each member of each team takes turns moving the pieces. The rules are: the rules of chess must be observed (i.e. pieces may not move except in accordance with the rules of chess) and a player may only affect one piece on their turn, pieces must be moved by magic not by physical touch, team mates may not speak to each other to confer, no “moves” outside of the rules of chess are allowed, a player may not interfere with another’s move nor cast magics during another’s move, no Perdo-ing pieces nor otherwise wrecking the game. This still leaves huge room for creativity – using Mentem spells to confer is permitted, flooding the board with fog to obscure the view is fine, Muto-ing one piece to become another type or casting Imagonem spells to make pieces invisible would be fine. She puts up seven-years access to one of her covenant’s vis sites (they have plenty of this type of vis in store now), and hopes to find someone who will wager access to a vis site of similar yield. (If players accept this weird challenge, then they will require reasonable Rego Herbam stats but will find that it is ultimately a contest of Intelligence – or Intelligence+Etiquette if you consider

chess to be part of Etiquette – with big bonuses for clever tactics such as psychic conferring, illusions, etc.).

- A Merinita maga has brought along a crippled beggar, and a lute. Her challenge is that either she will play her lute to make the lame beggar dance while an opponent tries to stop him dancing, or else someone else can try to make him dance while she tries to frustrate their efforts; she is happy to play the “game” either way. She puts up a chest full of silver as a stake, and is open to suggestions from any who would accept the challenge as to what they think is a reasonable stake for them to put up. Inevitably the whole thing is a prank – the beggar is a faerie, the “silver” is leaves. She will take on anyone who accepts the challenge if they seem to be approaching it with a sense of humour or irony, but will not take on anyone who actually seems to be taking it seriously.
- A warlike covenant has brought along “a magical life-sized statue of a wolf”. On command, ferocious wolves appear around it, attacking anyone within a circle drawn fifteen yards in radius from the statue. (Actually the wolves are summoned by a formulaic spell; but the covenant wants to hide the fact that one of its magi know that spell, while making people think their home is protected by a magic statue that spawns limitless wolves.) They and another team of five must take it in turns to fight the wolves. Combatants may use weapons or magic, but may not wear armour. If a combatant steps outside of the circle drawn fifteen yards from the statue, they are out; if a combatant is incapacitated they are out. The wolves are very much trying to kill those whom they are fighting, and spectators are encouraged to assist anyone who is “out” to the best of their ability (healing spells and dragging fallen fighters out of the combat area are encouraged, and characters who are only spectators might still earn the gratitude of combatants by helping out in this way). Whoever kills the most wolves, or whoever kills all the wolves while taking the least damage (to be judged by an experienced battlefield physician), is the winner. The covenant puts up a stake of ten assorted pawns of vis, and expects a similar stake.
- A young Flambeau mage challenges anyone who wishes to take him on to single combat with blunted weapons and non-damaging magics. The winner is the first to land three un-blocked blows. He offers as a prize a nicely engraved helmet, of moderate value but no special powers. He will accept an equally nominal wager from an opponent. He isn’t here to win booty – he has just passed his Gauntlet and is looking for a covenant to join, so his plan is to make this combat a big public spectacle where he can show off his skills in order to (hopefully) impress covenants who might take him in.
- A Criamon mage sits down in the middle of a the main path through the camp. He puts an empty box beside him. He draws a meaningless shape in the mud. And he waits.

Secondly, the Tournament is used to decide access to any resources that are held in common by the Normandy Tribunal, by covenants based within the Tribunal. *The Lion and the Lily* mentions that there is a Tribunal Library. So, the hosting covenant sets the terms of a single event which can be used to rank magi. Ranking in this event is used to determine who has first pick of the books. Competing is not necessary to request a

book, but as magi pick books in order of success, those who do not even attempt to compete may miss out on the books that they would like to borrow.

Order of Precedence

At mundane feasts diners sit on different tables and in different places in the hall depending on their social status. The Tribunal has taken this idea on board, and during the day before the evening of the actual Meeting it is customary for the hosts to throw a lavish feast where they assign to all attendees a seat based on what the hosts perceive to be their ranks. At the high table along with the host covenant's leader will sit the Praeco, presiding Quaesitor, heads of Houses, and any Arch-Mages present. But after that the hosts have to make subjective judgments. They might consider age, renowned deeds, reputations, whether a mage has trained an apprentice, whether they were victors at the last year's tournament, whether they provided impressive spectacles in the preceding days, etc. This gives the players a clear gauge of how they are regarded by their peers (or at least by the hosts). And it almost inevitably leaves someone feeling offended.

Possible story interests: **(1)** A young mage is indignant that one of the characters has been seated nearer to the hosts than him at the feast. He loudly protests, and challenges the character to certamen to prove his superiority. The hosts are embarrassed and insulted (he has just impugned their judgement and hospitality), but the challenge has been made. What does the character do? Eloquently getting the upstart to withdraw the challenge will save face for the hosts and gain a positive reputation; defeating the mage in certamen will impress many attendees (gaining a positive reputation); losing will be embarrassing (losing reputation). **(2)** Who are the characters sitting next to? This is a great way to introduce new magi who may feature in future stories, and gives the characters a chance for some last minute deal-making before the evening's meeting.

Grants and Rents

(This is completely different to the official source book.)

Vis sites are claimed and assigned to covenants as normal. However, the magi of the Normandy Tribunal have adopted a custom, inspired by the mundanes around them, of making "grants" of vis sites, in return for "rents". This is a little like the way that a mundane lord might hive off some of their holdings as a sub-fief in return for some sort of rent or service. And, like the mundane lords, they often want to make these grants not to institutions (covenants) but to individuals (magi) – an arrangement which irritates many traditionalists, e.g. in House Guernicus, who believe that this undermines the structure of the Order. Such grants may be made for seven years (until the next Tribunal Meeting) or for the recipient's lifetime. Rents are often paid in vis, but, influenced by mundane culture, they are sometimes paid in service. It is entirely permissible for those outside the Normandy Tribunal to take a grant, and where rents

are paid in vis (assuming more vis is paid than the sites yield) this can create a situation where on balance vis flows into this vis-poor Tribunal from outside – though there are not enough grants made in total for this to be a major consideration. Covenants typically announce well before the Tribunal Meeting if they are seeking to grant a site, so that other covenants can bid for it; in other cases secret negotiations take place: either way, it is customary to announce the grant at the Tribunal Meeting, so that other magi can have witnessed the deal, avoiding future arguments.

Possible story interests: **(1)** The players characters' may want to bid on specific sites. E.g. for a site that annually yields 5 pawns of vis they desire they may wish to offer an annual rent of 10 pawns of vis of which they have a surfeit (or 6 pawns, 8... 15... whatever they negotiate with the owner); or the owner might say that for a grant of a specific site they want one season's annual service (so the character loses a season a year to gain the site – and of course that season's efforts might lead to other stories). Some sites may even have a bit of mystery to them, and be something of a “lucky dip” – a covenant without the skills to investigate a weird site that they have discovered might grant it for seven years on condition that the recipient investigate and report on it. (This allows the storyguide to make sites temporarily available to the characters, without having to pre-generate lots of vis sites that they will never get to access. It also gives an easy way into to stories based around investigating mysterious sites.) **(2)** The characters may wish to put up their own sites for grants, to see what other magi will offer – so giving them more options in how to manage their covenant's resources. **(3)** There is no reason why only magi from the Normandy Tribunal would bid to receive a seven-year grant. Magi (including player characters) from outside the tribunal might come to the Tribunal Meeting as guests in order to seal deals to access vis sites within the Tribunal. **(4)** In unusual circumstances there is the potential for such grants to be frauds. A worthless site might be offered as if it were valuable. It is unlikely that a magi would so publicly, knowingly commit a fraud, since the deals must be witnessed by the great and the good of the Tribunal, but in desperate times someone may knowingly offer something worthless (e.g. asking for 20 pawns up-front in rent for something that is no more than a mundane area jazzed-up with some Imagoem spells, then taking the vis and running) and it may be that the Covenant offering the site has been deceived by someone else about its true nature. **(5)** A grant made “for the recipient's lifetime” sounds like a secure, long-term arrangement... until the Covenant that made the grant wants to revoke it, and finds that if the holder does not agree to dissolve the agreement then their only option may be to arrange the death of the holder. **(6)** Characters from a foreign Tribunal might get access to a vis site for seven years. This would allow the storyguide to run a “splinter saga” where a group of characters were sent to staff an outpost by the site, or to run stories and encounters which characters stumble across while travelling to or from the site, or simply to send characters away from the main saga area (e.g. to temporarily remove a mage if the player was unavailable for a period of time).

Informal Encounters

The tournament envisaged above makes the Normandy Tribunal Meeting much more than a formal legal gathering. The tournament increases attendance rates from Normandy's own magi and attracts capable magi from outside the Tribunal. This in turn makes it a place worth visiting if one wishes to build friendships and contacts, trade, seek a Covenant to join, etc. So while some Tribunals' Meetings may attract only those who are concerned specifically with the business of the meeting itself, the tournament means that the Normandy Tribunal Meeting becomes a kind of magical fair. People from outside the Tribunal who could be encountered here include:

- Covenants recruiting for new members
- Covenants seeking short-term allies for specific purposes – e.g. to help with Marches or Wars, to join risky expeditions, etc. (If using the Orphans of Merlin setting, then Sanguis Vento would want to send someone.)
- Capable magi looking for profit by joining teams for the tournament.
- Magi from covenants which talk a great deal of war but which find themselves constrained to act peacefully might be particularly keen to let off some steam in a tournament (depending on how you interpret the covenant of Horsingas, for example, they might fall into this category).
- Anyone with something to sell. This could include both mundane and magical sales – perhaps Verditius magi hoping to find patrons for their work, or craftsmen from covenants which have developed an exceptional range of mundane goods for sale (e.g. pigments, armour, etc.)
- Magi seeking a covenant to join, hoping to impress in the tournament and pitch themselves to lots of established covenants.
- Anyone who might be attracted by large concentrations of magi for purposes of picking up gossip, striking deals, spreading propaganda, trading vis, lobbying (e.g. ahead of the next Grand Tribunal), etc.