

Ars Magica

Ordo Nobilis

Mythic Europe's Nobility

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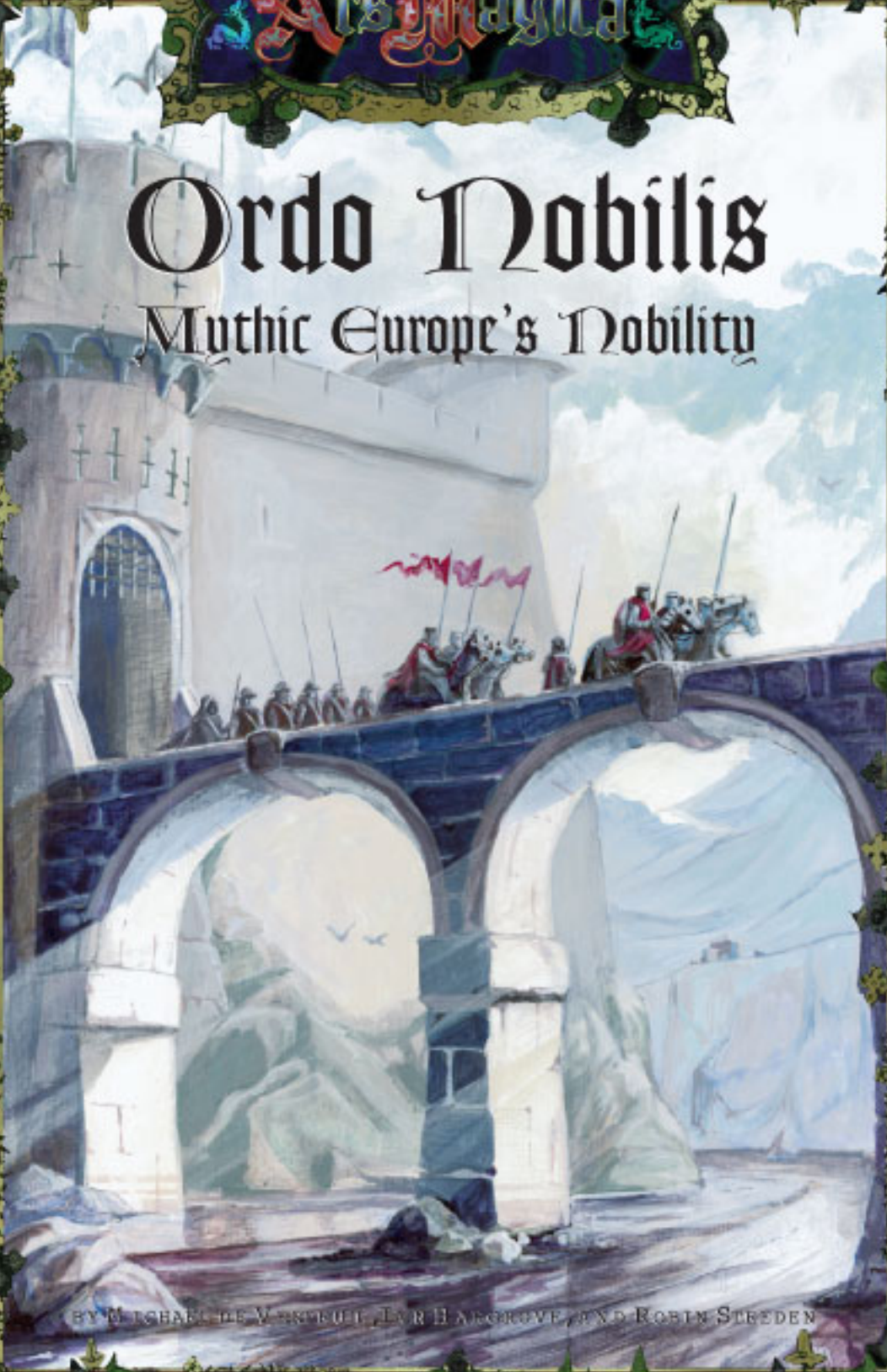


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Preface

Since its release, *Ars Magica* has carved a unique niche in the role-playing market and has developed an audience of devoted and geographically-diverse fans. While published in the United States of America, a substantial portion of the game's English-language sales are made abroad — not counting translated editions.

It is thus with both excitement and some trepidation that we three Canadians offer up our own contribution to the *Ars Magica* “canon,” the growing body of sourcebooks which builds and expands on the seminal efforts of Mark and Jonathan. Our excitement needs no explanation. Our trepidation, on the other hand, is due to the fact that the game remains, for many *Ars Magica* fans, a “sacred” trust. We hope our efforts will nonetheless meet with their approval.

With respect to the Mythic element of *Ordo Nobilis*, we have relied most heavily on the contemporary beliefs of the people who lived in the 12th and early 13th centuries. This may disappoint some, as it effectively excludes many of the direct romantic ancestors of modern high fantasy. But the key difference between the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and the other great 12th and 13th century poets is that, unlike the heroic epics of an earlier period, their works were understood by their contemporaries to be fiction. As such, the adventures of Sir Lancelot, a purely fictional character, are never alluded to in *Ordo Nobilis*.

Troupes and storyguides should not be held to such rigorous standards, however, and we commend the medieval romances to our readers as a rich source of color and adventure ideas. In fact, we ourselves have cheated a bit and made an exception of the Romance of Reynard the Fox. We have assimilated this work, along with

the fables of Aesop and Phaedrus, with medieval legends of animal faeries.

With respect to the more mundane aspects of 13th century Mythic Europe, *Ordo Nobilis* strives to adhere as closely as reasonably possible to the strictures of historicity. Our aim here is to please the hardened history buffs without turning off those for whom history is more of an “optional extra.” The “mundane” history we have included in this sourcebook (and there is a lot of it) is nonetheless probably fraught with unintentional errors, gaps, over-generalizations, and anachronisms. For this we can only apologize and plead the poverty of our scholarship and the time, space, and resources available to us. Nevertheless, we hope our readers will find between these two covers that which will help bring the Middle Ages alive for them. We trust it will prove an invaluable source of ideas and game mechanics for any saga in which contact with mundane medieval society plays a significant role.

With *Ordo Nobilis* we have attempted to look behind the common stereotypes and present a detailed picture of the life of the 13th century nobility, albeit in a mythic context. This sourcebook defines what a noble was, what the various ranks and titles meant, and how nobles interacted with each other and with broader society. It also delves into their concerns and interests, how they lived, what they did with their time, how they did it and, perhaps most importantly, why they did it.

The picture of the medieval nobility we have drawn is a composite one. Because of the intense variation in land tenure, custom, and legal practice from one place to the next, it applies fully nowhere in the Europe of the 13th century. This having been said, our picture probably applies more fully to northern France than

to anywhere else. There are good reasons for this. In the early 13th century, France was the cultural heart of Europe. It was the most populous realm; its ruler was the most powerful secular monarch; and it set fashion in all fields from food, clothing, courtly manners, and vernacular literature to formal theology. The institution of knighthood also found its origin in northern France, and this region of Europe continued to set the trend in the development of ever more expensive armor and weaponry. France was also the heart of the old Carolingian Empire, and its knights played the leading role in the successful First Crusade. Finally, French was quite literally the *lingua franca* of the 13th century European nobility.

Both for these reasons, and to stress the underlying unity of medieval noble civilization, we have chosen to adopt three conscious biases in *Ordo Nobilis* (albeit, sometimes with tongue in cheek): nobles are good, French nobles are best, and pious French nobles are best of all. This hierarchy broadly corresponds to the view universally held by 13th century nobles. How the various “non-French” nobles reconciled this with their own, often justifiable, sense of ethnic pride is of some interest.

For the English nobility the matter was simply dealt with. They considered themselves French, were recognized as French by others, and in fact *were* French (they came from Normandy, after all). The same applied to the nobility of southern Italy, and of the crusader states in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean. The Germans took a slightly different tack, mentally substituting the word “Frank” for “French.” As founding or (in the case of Bavarians, Saxons, Swabians, and Thuringians) adopted members of the Merovingian and then Carolingian Frankish kingdom, they were “Franks” too. The same could be said for the nobility of northern Italy. The Iberian rulers of Leon, Castile, and Portugal set great store by the fact they could trace their

descent from the French duke of Burgundy, while the king of Aragon was first and foremost count of Barcelona — still a part of France in 1220. Other poorer and more distant lands in Scandinavia and eastern Europe had surprisingly few inhibitions about adopting explicitly French feudal norms and practices. What they still lacked they sought to acquire through marriages with French aristocrats and through the wholesale importation of French culture, clerks, and governesses.

From the perspective of the French nobility, the Byzantines were unfortunately too “self-opinionated” to share in this general appreciation of all things French. But even they recognized the military superiority of French knights and had begun to adopt feudal political structures early in the 12th century. In any case, it is unlikely the crusader lords of Constantinople would have been much troubled by the “unreasonable prejudices” of their Byzantine subjects and enemies.

It follows from this discussion that we have not been able to cover the Islamic nobility of Al-Andalus, and of the Arab and Turkish East. To do so would have stretched any working definition of nobility to the breaking point and would have detracted from the picture we wished to highlight for our readers: that of a common noble culture and society ruling nearly all of Christian Europe, albeit with significant regional differences.

As a parting note, we would like to take this opportunity to thank our rigorous group of playtesters for their judicious and often pointed criticism, all of which has led to notable improvement.

Finally, and in conclusion, we would like to dedicate *Ordo Nobilis* to the millions of hard-working European peasants without whose toil and back-breaking labor over the centuries this sourcebook would never have been possible.

—The Authors





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