

The Origins and Evolution of the Tarot

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Summary

This article explores the origins and complex history of the Tarot, setting aside issues of symbolism, which are already covered extensively in the literature. Reproductions of selected cards illustrate the Tarot's development over the last six centuries. The Tarot can be traced back to card games from the East as well as to the mysteries and magic of the West.

The oldest extant Tarot decks, in which the Major and Minor Arcana are combined, come from fifteenth-century Italy. The Minor Arcana resemble medieval playing cards, bearing in mind that games of chance had broader meaning than they do today. The “pip” cards originated in China, and court cards were added as games migrated westward. The origins of the Major Arcana are less clear. The claim that they were invented to enhance card-game complexity is unconvincing. Rather they seem to have evolved from the talismans of Hermetic, Neoplatonic and medieval magic. Plausible theories link the Major Arcana with the mystery schools of ancient Egypt. The Tarot may bear traces of *Sensa*, the language of high initiates, and seems to have emerged with the blessing of the Planetary Hierarchy.

The aesthetic quality of Tarot cards has depended on card creation and reproduction technologies as well as on users' needs and resources. Inexpensive woodcut images sufficed for gaming and fortune telling, but the nobility of the Italian Renaissance insisted on decks hand-painted by leading artists. Symbolism and aesthetics may be of comparable importance in our own choice of Tarot decks for study, meditation, divination or magic.

Introduction

The Tarot, as we know it today, consists of seventy-eight images, customarily printed on cards resembling conventional playing cards. We speak of a “deck” of cards, or in

British English, a “pack.” The Tarot is used for esoteric study, meditation, divination, and occasionally ceremonial magic. The images suggest an underlying system of symbolism, though opinions differ as to how the symbols should be expressed and interpreted. Some esotericists hold the Tarot in the highest regard; others, along with much of the general public, view it as unwholesome. For a long time the Tarot bore the epithet: “The Devil's Picture Book.”

Notwithstanding the diversity of attitudes, broad consensus exists that the Tarot is an important element in the western esoteric tradition. Arthur Edward Waite, who designed the most familiar Tarot deck currently in use, declared: “The true Tarot is symbolism On the highest planes it offers a key to the Mysteries.”¹ To Harriette and Homer Curtis: “The Tarot is the most ancient of books, a collection of cards embodying the Secret Doctrine of the ages.”² To Paul Foster Case, writing in 1947: “The Tarot is a pictorial text-book of Ageless Wisdom. From its pages has been drawn inspiration for some of the most important works on occult science published during the last seventy-five years.”³ Eden Gray commented that “[t]he very word Tarot seems to strike a hidden chord—the love of mystery—in the hearts of many when they first look upon the strange and beautiful cards of the Tarot pack.”⁴ Carl Jung viewed the images as archetypes “which

About the Author

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mingle with the ordinary constituents of the flow of the unconscious, and therefore it [the Tarot] is applicable for an intuitive method that has the purpose of understanding the flow of life, possibly even predicting future events.”⁵

Many people view the Tarot as a guidebook to the spiritual path. To quote one source, the Tarot is “a finely tuned communication system, employing symbolism, mythology, and universal motifs, unrestricted by time, culture, and semantics.”⁶ Another writer commented: “As anybody who has embarked upon a journey with the Tarot knows, the journey never actually ends, and the Tarot cards hold within their symbolism the mysteries of Creation in their telling of the tale of the soul’s return to its original home.”⁷ A third declared: “When you discover the true nature of the Tarot, you will be taking your first step on the path of the initiate; this path takes you step by step toward the highest levels of spiritual awakening.”⁸ We shall suggest that the Tarot came into existence, at the time of the Renaissance, in response to a broad initiative by the Planetary Hierarchy to raise human consciousness.

The Tarot is divided into two sections, known as the Minor and Major Arcana. *Arcana* is a plural Latin noun (singular: *arcanum*), which ordinarily means “mysteries” but can also be interpreted to mean “keys (or even portal) to the mysteries.” An anonymous author, believed to be the Russian-born Valentin Tomberg, explained that the arcana

conceal and reveal their sense at one and the same time according to the depth of meditation. That which they reveal are not *secrets*, i.e., things hidden by human will, but are *arcana*, which is something quite different. An *arcanum* is that which it is necessary to “know” in order to be fruitful in a given domain of spiritual life. It is that which must be actively present in our consciousness.⁹

The fifty-six Minor Arcana closely resemble conventional playing cards. Four suits: Wands, Cups, Swords and Pentacles, correspond, with some historical justification, to clubs, hearts, spades and diamonds, respectively.¹⁰ Alternative names of the suits are listed in Table 1. French names are included because of strong

French influence on the Tarot in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Each suit contains ten “pip cards,” numbered ace (or one) through ten, and four court cards, usually denoted Page, Knight, Queen and King.¹¹ Note that the Tarot has an extra court card, versus the three in playing cards.

The images on the twenty-two Major Arcana are archetypal in quality. Their names, and even the order of the cards, vary from one deck to another, but a representative list is shown in Table 2.¹² French names are included as before. Twenty-one of the cards are assigned the Roman numerals I through XXI, while the Fool is either left unnumbered or is assigned the Hindu-Arabic zero (0).

The symbolism of Tarot cards is already addressed by an extensive literature, and the interested reader is referred thereto.¹³ The purpose of this article is to trace the history of the Tarot and examine theories of its origins. The literature touches on these latter topics; but the published information is fragmented, much of it is speculative, and some is patently erroneous. The most useful treatment is Paul Huson’s book *Mystical Origins of the Tarot*,¹⁴ though his focus is more on the history of Tarot symbols. Catherine Hargrave’s *A History of Playing Cards* is a useful companion source.¹⁵ Readers may also be interested in historian Mary Greer’s blog,¹⁶ though it is not used as a source in the present work.

The oldest known Tarot decks date from early fifteenth-century Italy. But the Tarot’s real origins are clouded in mystery, and competing theories attempt to explain how it came into existence and what its antecedents might have been. The academic consensus is that the Tarot evolved from card games that spread from China via the Middle East to Europe. A contrasting belief, expressed by many esotericists, is that the Tarot encodes the mystery teachings of ancient Egypt; one version asserts that it was preserved by Romani fortune tellers after destruction of the Library of Alexandria. The various theories will be examined and evaluated herein.

A major thesis of the present article is that the Major Arcana have roots in the talismans of

medieval and earlier magic, and approached their present form in the Hermetic and Neoplatonic revivals of the Italian Renaissance. Magic, in its broadest sense, is the transfer of energy from one level of reality to another, through the agency of a magician, or *magus*. Lying at the heart of occultism, magic is an activity in which all disciples will participate—by means of the Tarot or otherwise—at some point on the initiatory path. Participation requires a high level of responsibility and inner purity because the powers involved are potent, and the magus determines whether they are to be used for good or evil. “Good,” or “white,” magic overlaps in intent and/or form with religious liturgy and traditionally has been undertaken in the context of sacred ritual. Today it is often used in healing therapies.

“Talisman” is derived, via the Arabic *talsam* and the Byzantine Greek *telesma* (“performance of a religious rite”), from the Greek root *teleo* (“to complete or consecrate”). A talisman, to quote twentieth-century occultist Israel Regardie, is “any object, sacred or profane, with or without appropriate inscriptions or symbols, uncharged or consecrated by means of appropriate ritual magic or meditation.”¹⁷ Another authority insists that, whereas an amulet may have intrinsic magical properties, a talisman must be consecrated for its intended use.¹⁸ In either case, a talisman is designed to resonate with an elemental force, nonphysical entity, or other source of power. Exploiting the Law of Correspondences, it helps span, or break down, the barriers between the different levels of reality and serves as a visual aid in the invocation or evocation of the targeted power.

Another major thesis of this article is that, in order to serve as talismans, or indeed to be used effectively for meditation or divination, attention should be paid to the aesthetic value of Tarot images, as well as to their symbolism. Aesthetics has a positive effect on our own consciousness. It also serves to attract the higher devas who facilitate white magic and may guide divination. Recent efforts to recover the artistic quality of the Renaissance Tarot are to be commended.

Tarot Decks: a Brief History

Early Playing Cards

Card games were played in China as early as the ninth century CE. Decks of twenty-two monochromatic (black and white) cards were in common use by the eleventh century. In some cases playing cards served as currency, or at least “play money,” presumably to facilitate gambling. The fifteenth-century Chinese scholar Lu Rong described an earlier deck consisting of thirty-eight cards, divided into four suits: nine each in “coins,” “strings of coins,” and “myriads” of coins (10,000); and eleven in the suit “tens of myriads.”

Cards were produced by woodcut printing techniques, which, along with methods for producing paper or cardstock to print them on, also came from China.¹⁹ As these technologies spread to India, Persia, Egypt, and finally Europe, so did card games. Playing cards seem to have reached southern Europe in the 1370s, with almost simultaneous appearances in several locations. At first, card decks may have been imported from Malmuk sources in Egypt.²⁰ But by 1380 one Rodrigo Borges was operating as a “painter and playing card maker” in Perpignan, then ruled by the count of Barcelona.²¹

Most card players accepted the relatively crude images produced by woodcuts, and in their simplest application woodcut images are monochromatic. From time to time, however, wealthy individuals commissioned hand-painted playing cards. In 1392 Jacquemin Gringonneur painted three decks of cards for Charles VI of France, widely known as “Charles the Mad.” Claims that these were the first known Tarot cards are dismissed by historians; they were probably playing cards, though the Fool may have been included, serving the role of today’s Joker.

The fifteenth-century Topkapı deck, discovered in Istanbul in 1939, consisted of four suits of thirteen cards each: polo sticks, coins, swords, and cups. Each suit contained ten pip cards and three court cards: *malik* (king), *nā'ib*

malik (viceroy), and *thānī nā'ib* (deputy viceroy).²² The Seven of Swords from the Topkapi deck is shown in Figure 1.²³

Figure 1. Seven of Swords from the Topkapi Playing Card Deck (15th century)



Since the Chinese deck described by Lu Rong included no court cards, we may conclude that these were added after card games began their westward migration. The court cards of the Topkapi deck bore purely symbolic images because Islam prohibited human representation.²⁴ When card decks reached Europe, where no such proscriptions applied, the court cards acquired faces.²⁵ The queen may have been added to the uniformly masculine king, viceroy, and deputy viceroy—the two latter renamed knight and page—in response to instincts of courtly love.

Evolution of Tarot Decks

For a card deck to be considered a Tarot deck, it must include some number of Major Arcana in addition to the four suits of the Minor Arcana. The oldest known decks to meet this requirement date from the fifteenth century, the height of the Italian Renaissance.

Why the Major Arcana came to be called “triumphs,” or “trumps,” is unclear. The term may have been a reference to the six triumphs in Francesco Petrarca’s (1304–1374) epic poem *Triumphus Cupidinis* (“the Triumph of Love”): Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time and Eternity. Significantly, Petrarca is often lauded as “father of the Renaissance.” In any event, the

term links the Major Arcana to the superior values assigned to designated cards in card games—leaving aside the issue of which came first.

Early in the fifteenth century, the Milanese painter and illuminator Michelino Molinari da Besozzo (c.1370–c.1455) is credited with painting a Tarot deck, commissioned by an unknown patron. It consisted of four suits depicting different kinds of birds, and sixteen Major Arcana bearing images of Greek gods. None of Besozzo’s cards survives, but we have twenty-four images Besozzo created to illustrate a devotional text. The illustrations are similar in shape, size and decoration to the Tarot cards of a few years later and may indicate the style of the lost cards. Figure 2 shows “St Anthony” from the prayer book.²⁶

Figure 2. St Anthony from the Besozzo Prayer Book (15th century)



The oldest surviving Tarot cards, and even near-complete decks, date from the middle of the fifteenth century. In 1442 the D’Este family of Ferrara commissioned four decks, each containing the conventional four suits, plus a fifth suit that served as the Major Arcana. Eight cards survive, including one resembling the Lovers.²⁷

From the same time period we have the master prints of a set of fifty engravings. Now thought to have been created by two unknown artists, they were long attributed to the Paduan painter and printmaker Andreas Mantegna, and “Mantegna deck” continues to serve as a convenient label. All of the Mantegna images resemble

Major Arcana, and some have captions like “The Emperor,” “Pope,” and “Justice,” which appear in the modern Tarot. But the deck also includes “Servant” and “Gentleman,” along with cards representing the liberal arts, muses and planets.²⁸ Figure 3 shows the virtue *Speranza* (“Hope”) from the Mantegna Tarot.

Figure 3. Speranza (Hope) from the Mantegna Tarot(15th Century)



The Mantegna deck does not fit easily into either the playing cards or the “mainstream” Tarot of the period. But it illustrates the type and degree of experimentation that took place in the development of the Major Arcana. Moreover, we shall see that it remains relevant to modern interpretations of the Tarot.

The mainstream evolution of the Tarot in the mid-fifteenth century is exemplified by three decks commissioned by Duke Filippo Visconti and his son-in-law, and successor, Francesco Sforza. The best known was painted between 1451 and 1453. Usually referred to as the Visconti–Sforza deck, it was commissioned by Sforza and his wife Bianca Maria Visconti, Filippo’s daughter, probably to celebrate Francesco’s and Bianca’s victorious entry into Milan in 1450. The principal artist is believed to have been Bonifacio Bembo, who was active as a painter and manuscript illuminator from 1444 to 1477.²⁹

The Visconti–Sforza Tarot consisted of seventy-eight cards, of which all but four survive. Reproductions are readily available today, with plausible reconstructions of the missing cards.

Figures 4(a) and 5(a) show, respectively, the Seven of Swords and The High Priestess from the Visconti–Sforza deck.³⁰

A second deck, created sometime between 1442 and 1447, now consists of forty-eight cards. The third, dated to around 1466, may originally have consisted of eighty-six cards, of which sixty-seven survive. Interestingly, it includes two extra court cards in each suit: “Damsel” and “Lady on Horse”—that is, female knight—in addition to the King, Queen, Knight and Page.

An important contribution from the late fifteenth century was the Sola Busca deck, named for the Milanese family who donated the deck to the British Museum in 1907. Conventionally dated to about 1491, and attributed to either Marco Zoppo or Nicola di maestro Antonio, the complete deck of seventy-eight cards survives.³¹ The twenty-two Major Arcana include eighteen depicting characters of ancient Rome and four from the Bible. Most significant is pictorial illustration of the pip cards of the Minor Arcana, contrasting with the usual practice of showing only the requisite number of symbols of each suit. Pictorial illustration of the pip cards was not revived until the twentieth century.

The Renaissance Tarot’s golden age lasted less than a century. Little or no activity was reported in Italy after 1500, when war and foreign occupation took its toll. But the Tarot reappeared in France a century-and-a-half later. Rouen and Lyons became centers of French card production in the sixteenth century,³² followed in due course by Marseille, on the Mediterranean coast.

In about 1650, French master card maker Jean Noblet produced a Tarot deck. Noblet lived in Paris, but his deck is regarded as the first of the several “Marseille” decks, so named because of that city’s increasing preeminence in card printing. François Chosson produced another deck in 1672, Jean Dodal produced a third in 1701, and Nicolas Conver a fourth in about 1760.³³ They all have a similar flavor, with images less artistically sophisticated, but perhaps more lively, than those in the Visconti–Sforza deck. Figures 4(b) and 5(b) show the

Seven of Swords and High Priestess, respectively, from the Dodal Marseille deck.³⁴ The cards of the Marseille Tarot originally bore French names; names in multiple languages {for example Figure 5(b)} were added by a modern publisher.

While the Marseille Tarot owed its structure to the Renaissance—especially to the Visconti–Sforza deck—its imagery drew upon Middle Eastern precedents. Swords in the Italian Tarot decks are straight, following European tradition dating back to the Age of Chivalry {Figure 4(a)}. By contrast, most of the swords in the Marseille decks look like scimitars, resembling those in the Topkapı playing-card deck; the respective Seven of Swords cards are shown in Figures 1 and 4(b). Aside from these differences, the Visconti–Sforza and Marseille decks jointly served as the prototypes for most modern Tarot decks.

In the late nineteenth century, the Marseille Tarot became the focus of attention of two individuals who became famous in their respective circles. British occultist Macgregor Mathers wrote a pamphlet on divination in 1888, subsequently published in book form: *The Tarot: Its Occult Significance*.³⁵ The following year Gérard Encausse (1865–1916), who adopted the pseudonym Papus, published his influential *Le Tarot des Bohémiens* (“The Tarot of the Bohemians”) in France.³⁶ Mathers illustrated his book with the Dodal Marseille deck, while Papus showed the Dodal and Convey decks side-by-side for comparison.

Mathers co-founded the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, in 1888, and two of its most prominent members created new Tarot decks: Arthur Waite and Aleister Crowley. Waite was assisted by artist Pamela Coleman Smith, who reportedly spent two years on the project. The Waite–Smith deck, published in 1909, is also known as the “Rider” deck after its original publisher, the Rider Company.³⁷ Reportedly, Waite communicated his ideas in the form of verbal or written instructions, giving Smith broad latitude in the choice and treatment of images. She may have studied and been influenced by the Sola Busca deck, which had just been made available for public examination. Significantly, the Waite–Smith deck was the

first since the fifteenth century to involve pictorial illustration of the pip cards. In any event the symbolism and lively artwork made the Waite–Smith deck the most widely used Tarot deck in the English-speaking world. Figures 4(c) and 5(c) show the Seven of Swords and High Priestess, respectively.³⁸

The “Universal Waite Tarot Deck” was published in the early 1990s, based on Smith’s original line drawings, but with enhanced colors. While some users have criticized the changes, others, including the present author, feel that they improve the look and feel of the deck.

Aleister Crowley and Lady Frieda Harris created the “Thoth” deck, whose early version is described in Crowley’s *The Book of Thoth* (1944).³⁹ Crowley and Harris continued to work on the cards after the book appeared, and the final version was not published until 1969—after their deaths. Figures 4(d) and 5(d) show the Seven of Swords and High Priestess from the Thoth Tarot.⁴⁰

Another new deck was created, with the help of artist Jessie Burns Parke, by Paul Foster Case founder of Builders of the Adytum, a derivative of the Golden Dawn. Hundreds of other Tarot decks have been created over the past one hundred years, and new ones continually appear, offering the insights, esoteric persuasions, and artistic talents of a wide variety of people.

Attempts have been made to imitate the artwork of the Renaissance Tarot—digitally, rather than by painting. One is the “Golden Deck,” created by Kat Black and published in 2004, which consists of collages of details from the Visconti–Sforza Tarot but with symbolism reflecting more recent precedents. Figures 4(e) and 5(e) show the Seven of Swords and High Priestess in the Black deck.⁴¹ Another is the “Botticelli” deck, created by Atanas Atanassov and published in 2007; it was assembled from details from the paintings of Italian artist Allessandro Botticelli (1445–1510).⁴² Figures 4(f) and 5(f) show the Seven of Swords and High Priestess in the Atanassov deck.⁴³ Gone from both Black’s and Atanassov’s High Priestess is the iconic, blue-

robed Isis/Mary figure of the Waite–Smith card {Figure 5(c)}.

Perhaps the lack of a continuous historical precedent for illustrating the pip cards has given designers latitude in the way they treated their subjects. For example, we can see a resemblance between the Seven of Swords in the Waite–Smith and Black decks {Figures 4(c) and (e)}, but Atanassov’s treatment is entirely different {Figure 4(f)}. Crowley returned to the custom of purely symbolic pip cards {for example Figure 4(d)}.

Methods of Production

When we speak of “producing” a playing-card or Tarot deck, we have to recognize that, prior to the twentieth century, creation and reproduction of images meant either hand painting or some form of printing, using woodcuts, etching or engraving.

Production also implies the availability of paper, parchment, card stock, or other medium on which the image could be displayed. Paper was invented in China in the first or second century CE. Paper manufacturing came to Moorish Spain in the eleventh century. By the thirteenth century it had spread other parts of Europe, soon to replace fabric, parchment and velum for all but the most valued documents.

The standard method of printing cards was woodblock printing, or what is now called *xylography*. It was invented in China and spread westward, along with paper production. Card games followed at every step, and the printing of cards was one of the first applications of woodcut techniques in the West. In the fifteenth century Milan became a center of woodcut printing and card production.

In its simplest application a single woodcut was required for each image. The image was

carved into a flat block of wood. Areas to remain uncolored were carved away, leaving the image in relief. Pressing an inked block against the paper or card produced the desired copy. The technique produced monochromatic (typi-

cally black and white) images. Once a woodcut was prepared, it could be used multiple times, offering a rudimentary form of mass production.

Color printing, which came to the West from Japan in the sixteenth century, required multiple woodcuts for a single image. It could produce vivid effects but was impracticable for more than three or four colors. Alternatively, color could be added by hand painting or, more often, by stenciling the monochrome woodcut images. Alt-

hough some of the economy of mass production was lost, stenciling was effective and could be performed by relatively low-paid workers. The fourteenth-century Rodrigo Borges, described as a “painter and playing card maker,” may have painted other works. But most likely he used woodblocking to print his playing cards and then had colors applied by stenciling.

Fine detail is hard to achieve in a woodcut, and colors—where they are applied at all—are “flat,” without subtle variations in hue, tint, tone or shade. The Marseille decks {see for example Figures 4(b), 5(b)} illustrate stenciled woodcut images of relatively high-quality; poorer examples may have preceded (or followed) them.

Card images could, of course, be created entirely by hand painting. Hand painting permitted the incorporation of a whole spectrum of colors, subtle shading, and fine detail. Silver or gold leaf could be used to enhance visual effect. As we have seen, the wealthiest families

Arthur Edward Waite, who designed the most familiar Tarot deck currently in use, declared: “The Tarot is true symbolism. . . . On the highest planes it offers a key to the Mysteries.” To Harriette and Homer Curtis: “The Tarot is the most ancient of books, a collection of cards embodying the Secret Doctrine of the ages.” To Paul Foster Case, writing in 1947: “The Tarot is a pictorial textbook of the Ageless Wisdom.

of Renaissance Italy hired leading artists to create Tarot decks—artists whom, at other times, might be painting altarpieces, frescoes, or portraits of the nobility. The artists might include heraldic devices in the designs and/or portrayals of the patron or the patron’s family, as was also the custom when painting sacred or mythological scenes. Appreciative patrons meant further commissions and referrals.

Besozza’s illustrations and the cards of the Visconti–Sforza deck are of the highest artistic quality. Hand painting was extremely labor-intensive, however; to paint a complete deck could take months or years. Few decks could be produced, and the cost was high, restricting availability to a very few individuals or families; Visconti reportedly was the richest man in Italy. The uniqueness of a Tarot deck hand painted by a recognized artist afforded prestige. But we cannot imagine such decks being handled on a regular basis; the delicate artwork could easily be damaged. More likely they would be created for special occasions, and then would reside in display cabinets, to be brought out on other special occasions. Decks intended for frequent handling would be produced by less expensive methods.

While we have examples of Tarot decks painted by prominent artists, we do not know how many decks were painted by lesser-known artists—or, for that matter, artisans with minimal artistic skills. Crude copies of existing decks could be made for sale at markets or fairs. The fact that no cheap decks of that nature survive is unsurprising.

Etching or engraving provided an alternative to woodblocking, where monochromatic images were acceptable. The initial step was to etch or cut fine slits, defining the image, in a thin metal plate. The second step, which could be repeated multiple times, was to place the plate onto the paper, card, or other material, and to pour ink onto the plate. The image was reproduced by ink seeping through the slits.

Etching and engraving were more expensive than woodblocking but could produce finer detail. They were used primarily for reproducing maps and portraits, which demanded high resolution. But we have two examples of the use of engraving to produce Tarot cards. One was the Mantegna Tarot. The other, allegedly inspired by it, was a selection of Tarot images created by German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528).⁴⁴

Preparing woodcuts, and even engraved or etched plates, was relatively easy for highly stylized images—like the traditional pip cards in which the suit symbol was repeated a given number of times, and minimal decoration added. It was considerably more time-consuming for pictorial images, like the Major Arcana and court cards, and the costs were correspondingly higher. Fortunately, the initial costs could be amortized over substantial numbers of copies. Nevertheless, printers pressed for more efficient, and more versatile, reproduction technologies for all kinds of images.

The Waite–Smith deck included pictorial pip cards, inflating the initial costs still more. The deck became popular because of the easy-to-remember symbolism of its seventy-eight pictorial images, as well as growing interest in esoterica that the Golden Dawn helped create. But the deck would never have become a best-seller if newly emerging printing methods had not driven prices down to affordable levels. The Waite–Smith deck was reproduced by a chromolithographic technique, or, from 1940 onward, by photographic techniques.⁴⁵

Most recently, digital image processing has made possible the reproduction of colored images in all their detail and subtlety. Taking advantage of this new capability, hand-painting of Tarot cards is again becoming popular. Time, effort and artistry can be invested in a deck in the hope of selling hundreds or thousands of copies. The “Golden Dawn Temple Tarot deck,” published in 2016, took Harry and Nicola Wendrich seven years to complete.⁴⁶

Figure 4. The Seven of Swords in Tarot Decks through the Ages

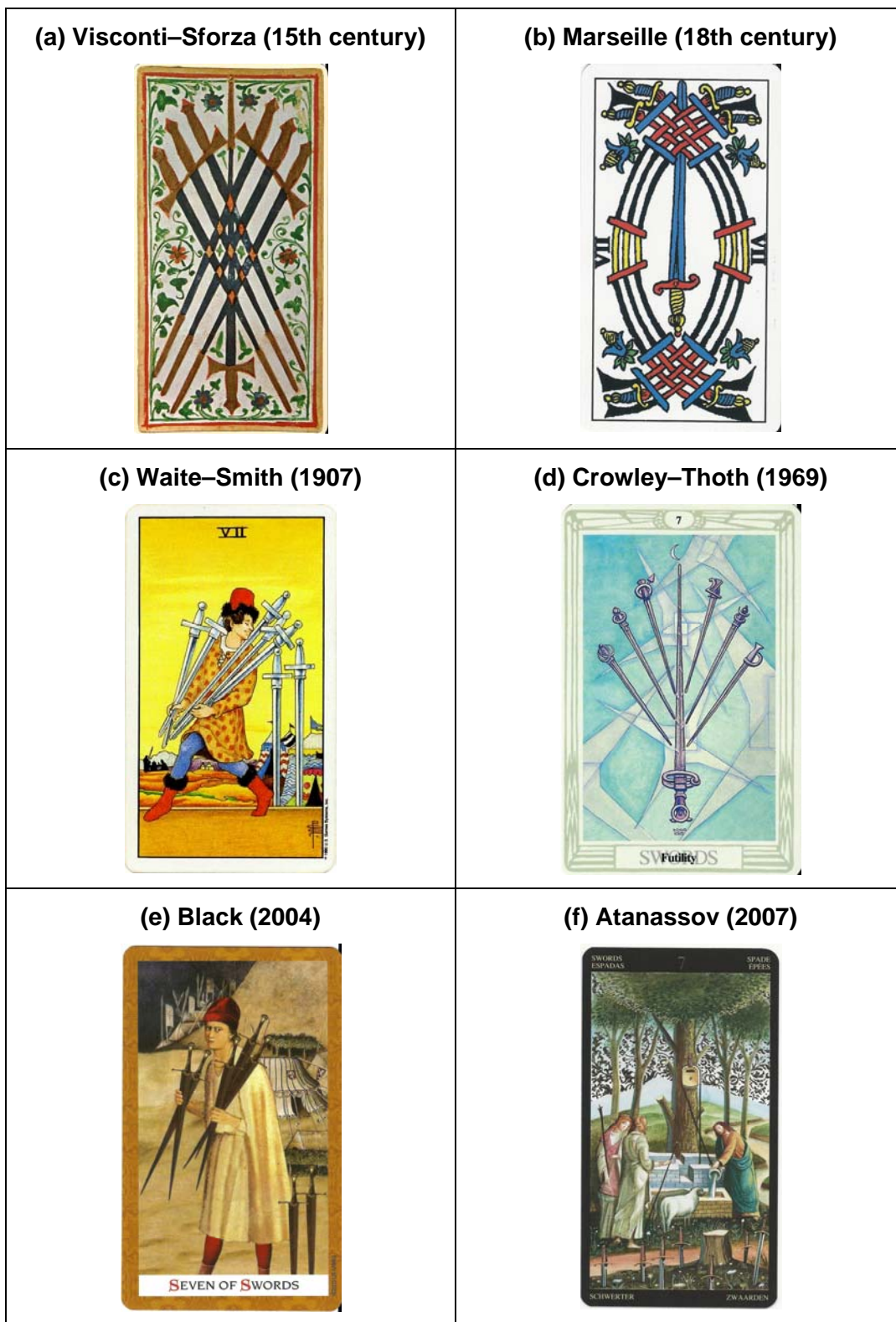


Figure 5. The High Priestess in Tarot Decks through the Ages



The Tarot as a Card Game

An enduring theory, with strong support from academic historians, is that the Tarot originated as a card game. Significantly, the earliest records of the Tarot date from a few decades after the arrival of card games in Italy. And we know that Tarot decks were used for gaming in fifteenth-century Italy.

Pre-European playing card decks, like the Lu Rong and Topkapı decks, were surprisingly similar to modern playing cards. They contained nothing resembling Major Arcana. Yet games appeared in northern and central Italy with additional cards that could triumph over, or “trump,” cards of the four suits. The rules of one such game were published in a manuscript by Martiano da Tortona, dated to 1425.⁴⁷

These additional cards, or what we now know as the Major Arcana, supposedly were invented and added to existing card decks to facilitate more complicated games. Soon, between sixteen (the Besozzo deck) and fifty (the Mantegna deck) new cards were in use. By 1500, typical decks included the now-familiar twenty-two Major Arcana, and the identities of most of the cards were established.⁴⁸

Card games involving separate trump cards were referred to as *trionfi*. The first known use of the term was in 1440, when a Florentine notary recorded the transfer of two *trionfi* decks to a Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta. *Trionfi* is the Italian equivalent of the Latin plural noun *triumphi* (singular *triumphus*: “triumph,” “victory,” or possibly “trump”). In about 1450 Jacopo Antonio Marcello of Venice, who had come into possession of the Besozzo Tarot deck, seems to have re-gifted it to Isabelle of Lorraine, wife of King René of Anjou.⁴⁹ Marcello’s accompanying letter, written in Latin, indicated that the deck was intended to be used in a game, which he described as *ludus triumphorum*. *Triumphorum* is the genitive plural of *triumphus*.

By 1500 the term *trionfi* had disappeared, and *tarocci*, *tarocchi* or *tarock*—from which the French word *Tarot* evolved—had taken its place. These latter terms may have come from regional dialects in Italy and the German-speaking area of Switzerland, or they may

have referred to games with different rules. Further comments on the origin and significance of the word “Tarot” will be made later.

The theory that the Major Arcana were added to enhance card-game complexity has merit, but it leaves unanswered questions:

- The worldwide community of modern card players, like its medieval counterpart in Asia and the Middle East, views a deck of four suits, and possibly a Joker, as an adequate basis for a wide variety of games. Certain cards can be designated as trumps, according to the rules of a particular game. Why then were fifteenth-century Italian card players not content with traditional decks? Why did they suddenly find it necessary to add extra cards to serve as trumps?
- Perhaps the Renaissance mind demanded particularly challenging games. But why were so many new cards added within a short period of time? The potential complexity of a game played with seventy-eight (or more) cards is many times greater than a game played with fifty-two or fifty-six.⁵⁰ One might have expected a more gradual evolution in which one or two extra cards were added every few years, as players adapted to and accepted the new challenges, or as new games were created.
- If the objective was simply to expand game complexity, and trumps had to be separate from the four suits, why were the trumps not designated in some simple manner, say by letters of the alphabet, with minimal decoration? Instead, images of rich, symbolic or archetypal value were chosen, involving high initial costs, even when woodblocking was used.
- Finally, why did families like the Viscontis and Sforzas invest so heavily in the artwork of their Tarot decks, when that very artwork was vulnerable to damage from the frequent shuffling card games imposed?⁵¹

The more plausible scenario is that proto-Major Arcana were already in existence in 1400. They had been created for some other purpose, which shall argue was ceremonial magic, and new cards were created, in the same lineage, as that purpose expanded. Card game players co-opted and exploited the available Major Arcana and may have been responsible for conflating them with the playing card decks that formed the Minor Arcana. But they were not the driving force behind the development of the Major Arcana.

Tarot, Egypt, and the Romani

The “French School”

French occultist Jean-Baptiste Alliette (1738–1791), who wrote under the pseudonym “Etteilla,” was the first-known professional Tarot reader. His book *Etteilla, or How to Entertain Yourself With the Deck of Cards Called Tarot* (1770) helped popularize use of the Tarot for divination.⁵² It described a number of spreads and provided hints on interpretation. But he did not take credit for that knowledge; he attributed it to an unnamed Italian whom he had met sometime earlier.⁵³

A close contemporary of Etteilla’s was the French Freemason and former Huguenot clergyman Antoine Court (1725–1784), who called himself Antoine Court de Gébelin. De Gébelin claimed that the Tarot was an arcane repository of timeless esoteric wisdom. In 1781 he wrote:

Were we to hear that there exists in our day a Work of Ancient Egyptians, one of their books which had escaped the flames that devoured their superb libraries, and one which contains their purest doctrine on most interesting subjects, everyone would doubtless be anxious to acquire the knowledge of so valuable and extraordinary a work. Were we to add that this book is widely spread through a large part of Europe, and for several centuries it has been accessible to any one, would it be still more surprising?⁵⁴

The flames Gébelin referred to were those that destroyed the Library of Alexandria, and perhaps other academic facilities in Egypt, in the

fourth century CE. Gébelin’s thesis was that the Tarot, by his own time readily available throughout Europe, encoded the essence of the Egyptian mysteries. Priests had distilled the ancient Book of Thoth into these images. Thoth was originally an Egyptian moon god, later to invent writing, reveal hieroglyphics to humankind, and serve as scribe to the sun god Ra.⁵⁵ He was depicted in Egyptian art as a man with the head of an ibis, his long beak suggestive of a quill. Thoth became identified with the pre-existing Olympian god Hermes, upon the Hellenization of Egypt in the fourth century BCE, and eventually with the Roman messenger-god Mercury. As for “Book of Thoth,” we do not know whether there was actually a book or whether it referred to a body of teachings.

According to Gébelin proto-Tarot cards encoding the Egyptian teachings were brought to Rome, preserved secretly by the popes, and eventually brought to Avignon during the papal exile in the fourteenth century. From Avignon the cards—or at least the associated images—spread throughout France and beyond.

In the same work Gébelin credited his contemporary, Louis-Raphaël-Lucrèce de Fayolle, Comte de Mellet, with suggesting correspondences between the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana and the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Soon, esotericists began to see correspondences between the Tarot and the Kabbalah. And within a few years of the Gébelin’s publication, Tarot cards were being used for esoteric study and meditation, as well as for divination.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the Tarot became a focus of intense study by French occultists led by Alphonse Louis Constant (1810–1875). Constant, who referred to himself as a magus and adopted the pseudonym Éliphas Lévi Zahed,⁵⁶ claimed optimistically that “a prisoner devoid of books, had he only a Tarot of which he knew how to make use, could in a few years acquire a universal science, and converse with an unequalled doctrine and inexhaustible eloquence.”⁵⁷

Lévi’s Spanish-born student, Papus, agreed with Gébelin on the Tarot’s Egyptian origins,

but he rejected the notion that the papacy had been its custodian; instead it was the nomadic ethnic group known as the Romani.⁵⁸ Papus referred to the Romani by the then-popular term *Bohémiens* (Literally “Bohemians,” but rendered in English translations of his books as “Gypsies”).⁵⁹ The Romani are believed to have migrated to Europe from India about 1,500 years ago.

Reports from eleventh-century Constantinople and fourteenth-century Germany refer to nomadic ethnic groups engaged in fortune telling.⁶⁰ Whether they were Romani is unclear, and whether they used Tarot cards was not recorded. Yet Papus boldly linked the Romani with the Tarot and saw in their divination and gaming interests the fortuitous preservation of a most important “book”:

The Gypsies possess a Bible which has proved their means of gaining a livelihood, for it enabled them to tell fortunes; at the same time it has been a perpetual source of amusement, for it enables them to gamble. Yes, the game of cards called the Tarot, which the Gypsies possess, is the Bible of Bibles. It is the book of Thoth Hermes Trismegistus, the book of Adam, the book of the primitive Revelation of ancient civilization.”⁶¹

Papus further asserted that the Marseille Tarot was “really the exact representation of the primitive Egyptian Tarot, slightly altered to the epoch denoted by the costumes.”⁶² He added: “Only the Gypsies possess the primitive pack intact.”⁶³

Papus’ assertions are vulnerable to challenge on several fronts. The famous library of Alexandria, founded by the Ptolemies in the third century BCE, is credited with having accumulated a wealth of ancient teachings. But the library was torched by Julius Caesar in 50 BCE, severely damaged in about 270 CE, and almost totally destroyed by Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria in 391 CE. It ceased to exist in any form after the Muslim invasion in the seventh century.

Valuable materials were lost every time the library suffered damage. Little material of any significance, and none of the oldest, are

thought to have survived the end of the fourth century CE. Sometime prior to that date, if we are to believe Papus, priests of the ancient mysteries encoded their teachings onto Tarot cards and gave them to the Romani. Allegedly the priests trusted that mundane use would ensure the images’ survival until such time as enlightened people recognized the images for what they were and could reconstruct the ancient teachings.

We do not know whether any Romani had reached Egypt by the fourth century, or if Romani anywhere were involved in fortune telling or gambling at that time. Even if they were, the only available means of reproducing the cards would have been hand painting. Woodblock printing was invented in China in the second century CE, but it did not reach the Middle East until well into the Middle Ages. Use of the Tarot would necessarily have been on a small scale, in competition with gaming or divination alternatives that were more immediately accessible and made fewer technological demands.

Papus mentioned the Tarot decks of the Renaissance, but he did not explain whether their creators built upon the decks used by the Romani or had independent channels extending back to ancient Egypt. Neither did he credit Renaissance Italy, or for that matter his own countrymen, Etteilla and Gébelin, for making any meaningful contribution to the Tarot: “Only the Gypsies possess the primitive pack intact.”

Hermes, the “Egyptian Tarot,” and the Kabbalah

De Gébelin and Papus both made reference to Thoth, and associated with him the name Hermes Trismegistus. The title *Trismegistus* (“Thrice Great”) first appeared in an inscription on the second-century BCE Ibis shrine at Sakkara, Egypt.⁶⁴ And Plutarch mentioned Hermes Trismegistus in the first century CE. But Hermes Trismegistus came to be revered as a high initiate, a priest-king, who lived at a much earlier time. Some people believed that he was Moses’ teacher, or even Abraham’s, while others suggested that he lived at the time of Noah or Zoroaster. His original name must

have been something other than the Latinized Greek Hermes Trismegistus, but we do not know what it was.

Authors who described themselves as “Three Initiates” wrote in 1912 that the Egyptians deified Hermes Trismegistus and called him Thoth; in due course Thoth became the Greek god Hermes.⁶⁵ Whether or not that scenario is true, the alleged sequence of events can be reconciled with key dates. If Hermes Trismegistus—or whatever he was called then—was Abraham’s teacher, that would place him at around 2000 BCE. The earliest known depiction of the Egyptian god Thoth dates from about 1,400 BCE—or the time of the Exodus. Hermes, son of Zeus, was mentioned in the Homeric poems, which are believed to have been written in the eighth or seventh century BCE, and widespread awareness of him probably reached Egypt no later than the fourth century BCE, when Alexander the Great conquered Egypt.

Reverence for Hermes Trismegistus produced the Greco-Roman esoteric system known as Hermetism. It drew its inspiration from texts that came to light early in the Common Era.⁶⁶ The texts included fifteen tractates, collectively known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and a few companion texts like the *Asclepius*. Although the texts were written in Greek, they claimed to present the mystery teachings of ancient Egypt.

The Hermetic texts described a system of magic, which will be discussed in its turn. They also spoke of God, man, and the quest for enlightenment; and they contained prophecies that seemed to foretell the coming of Christ and the Redemption. The writings of this ancient Egyptian sage apparently corroborated and expanded on the writings of the Old Testament prophets. As a result, the *Corpus* came to the attention of the church fathers and other Christian scholars.

After the Greco-Roman civilization went into decline, Hermetism gradually evolved into the broader system of *Hermeticism*, which incorporated concepts and practices from other esoteric traditions and added the *Emerald Tablet* to its core literature. The *Emerald Tablet* was

discovered much later than the classical Hermetic texts, but it too was attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.⁶⁷ The work contains the famous quote (paraphrased): “As above, so below.”

Hermeticism was a blend of magic, astrology, divination and alchemy. Hermes Trismegistus is often described as the “father of alchemy.” But the *Corpus Hermeticum* never mentions alchemy, and the *Emerald Tablet* only refers to it indirectly. Alchemy may have been studied in ancient Egypt, but it was virtually unknown in Europe until westerners came into contact with Arab scholars in the tenth century.

Hermeticism played a relatively small role in medieval European esotericism. It blossomed in the Italian Renaissance and continued to grow in influence thereafter. Yet Hermeticism would soon receive a potentially devastating blow.

Swiss classical scholar and philologist Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) demonstrated, by means of textual analysis, that the *Corpus Hermeticum* and associated texts were not nearly as old as previously thought: the vocabulary was relatively modern; and, rather than prophesying the coming of Christ, the texts referred to events that had already taken place. The texts apparently were written early in the Common Era. Academic critics seized upon Casaubon’s revelation to assert—without justification—that the ancient Egyptian “Hermes Trismegistus” was fictitious. Neither could Casaubon’s work rule out the possibility that the texts were based on earlier teachings, perhaps an oral tradition extending back to a real Hermes Trismegistus.

By then Hermeticism had acquired a life of its own and was sufficiently robust that it did not collapse, either from Casaubon’s revelation or from Enlightenment rationalism, which swept Europe a few decades later. Indeed, Hermeticism experienced a revival, beginning in the nineteenth century, to which Lévi; Papus; Anna Kingsford, former Theosophist and co-founder of the Hermetic Society; and prominent members of the Golden Dawn all contributed.

Papus and others continued to believe that Hermes Trismegistus was a real personage. The “Three Initiates,” referred to earlier, reit-

erated that Hermes Trismegistus was a contemporary of Abraham, adding: “All the fundamental and basic teachings embedded in the esoteric teachings of every race may be traced back to Hermes. Even the most ancient teachings of India undoubtedly have their roots in the original Hermetic Teachings.”⁶⁸ A bold statement indeed!

Aleister Crowley was indifferent to the historical record, to Papus’ account of Romani involvement, and to the wisdom allegedly communicated to Mathers by the “Secret Chiefs.” Crowley was even indifferent to the veracity of his own earlier work, which claimed that his (Crowley’s) teachings were communicated by the “Lord of Silence.”⁶⁹ “It is not here useful,” he explained, “to discuss the evidence which goes to establish the truth of this claim. . . . It would make no difference if the statement of any of the persons concerned turned out to be false.”⁷⁰

Crowley nevertheless based his whole concept of the Tarot on an Egyptian connection. He declared that the Tarot was self-authenticating, at least as studied with “the assistance of superiors whose mental processes were, or are, pertaining to a higher dimension.”⁷¹ The Tarot came from Egypt and it is “beyond doubt a deliberate attempt to represent, in pictorial form, the doctrine of the [Kabbalah].”⁷²

As early as the sixteenth century Judaic scholars had studied paths, or pathways, connecting adjacent sephiroth on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. Twenty-two paths had been identified, each corresponding to a Hebrew letter.

In the Golden Dawn tradition these paths were recognized as opportunities to contemplate the juxtaposition of energies represented by the connected sephiroth. The paths became associated, not only with Hebrew letters, but also with Major Arcana in the Tarot. Dion Fortune, who claimed to have received the information in visionary experiences, commented that the paths “correspond perfectly with the Tarot trumps” and provide “the keys to esoteric astrology and Tarot divination.”⁷³ For example, she associated the path from Malkuth to Yesod with the letter *tav* and the Tarot card XXI: “the World”; she associated the path from Yesod to Hod with *resh* and card XIX: “the Sun.”

Fortune associated the Minor Arcana with the sephiroth themselves, the four suits symbolizing the four “worlds” of the Kabbalah. Thus the Ace of Wands corresponds to Kether in the highest world of Atziluth, the “World of Emanations”; the Ace of Cups to Kether in Briah, the “World of Thrones”; the Ace of Swords to Kether in Yetzirah, the “World of Formation and of Angels”; and the Ace of Pentacles to Kether in Assiah, the “World of Action, or Matter.”⁷⁴

Gareth Knight, who never met Fortune but considered her his mentor, agreed that “the twenty-two Trumps of the Tarot relate to the Paths.” But he took a somewhat different perspective with regard to the Minor Arcana: “As correspondences to the Tree of Life, the sixteen Court Cards to the four worlds, and the forty small cards to the Sephiroth according to number.”⁷⁵

The Tarot as Talismans

Hermetic and Neoplatonic Magic

The Tarot seems to be connected, not only with Hermeticism, but also with the earlier Hermetism, which involved a strong belief in magic and the practice of magical ritual. Hermetic magic exploited the resonance believed to exist between the natural world and beneficent celestial bodies, or the lives that animated them. Its methods, to quote historian Frances Yates, “presuppose that continued effluvia of influences pouring down on earth from the stars . . . could be canalized and used by an operator with the requisite knowledge.”⁷⁶ This knowledge included the creation of effective talismans.

Hermetism shared its appeal to the upper classes of the Mediterranean region with other esoteric traditions, including Gnostic and proto-orthodox Christianity, esoteric Judaism, and Neoplatonism. The several traditions competed with one another for attention and followers but also overlapped in their ideals and methods. Many people dabbled in more than one.

Most important for our present discussion was Neoplatonism. Over the course of 200 to 300 years, Platonism had moved from the strict intellectualism of classical Greece to the more

intuitive “Middle Platonism.” Neoplatonism moved still farther, embracing mysticism and magic, while preserving a thread of philosophical concepts extending back to Plato. Neoplatonism had its sacred text: the *Chaldean Oracles*. Now dated to the second century CE, the *Oracles* consist of Hellenistic commentary on a mystery poem believed to have originated in ancient Chaldea, or Babylonia. Because Neoplatonism had philosophical underpinnings, however, it depended less on its core text than Hermeticism did on the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Prominent Neoplatonists Plotinus (204-270), Iamblichus (245-325), and Proclus (412-485) all wrote of the branch of ritual magic known as *theurgy* (literally “divine work”). Its goal was to attract divine beings—sometimes accompanied by entourage of *daemons*—to descend into sacred objects, like statues, or into participants themselves.⁷⁷ In the latter case, the participants hoped to attain a state of prophetic ecstasy—or even mystical union, though the latter state was rare.⁷⁸ Notwithstanding the *Oracles*’ ostensible connection with Chaldea, theurgy claimed Egyptian roots, as is revealed by the title of Iamblichus’ major work *Theurgia, or The Egyptian Mysteries*.

Whereas institutional Christianity valued the Hermetic teachings insofar as they seemed to prophesy the coming of Christ, it was more hostile to Neoplatonism, which it regarded as a theological competitor.⁷⁹ Yet the church embraced the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius, largely because this unknown Neoplatonic scholar of the sixth century or thereabouts was confused with Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles*. His most important contribution concerned the angelic hierarchy of nine “choirs.”⁸⁰ But the Pseudo-Dionysius also discussed the symbolism of stones and their use in the construction of talismans.⁸¹

When the Dark Ages descended on Europe, those esoteric traditions could easily have been lost.⁸² They survived, at least in fragmented form, in orthodox Christianity, in neo-Gnostic movements like Manichaeism, and in the Judaic Kabbalah.⁸³ Large portions of the teachings also found their way into the Arab world; key texts were translated into Arabic—to await

retranslation into Greek and Latin at the time of the Renaissance.

Some occult teachings may have degenerated into folk magic, or were absorbed into the folk magic that had existed from time immemorial. Medieval folk magic was a collection of spells, enchantments, divinations, evocations and incantations designed for almost every conceivable purpose. On ethical lines it broke down into “good” or “white” magic, in which the power was directed to benefit users or clients; and “bad” or “black” magic, whose purpose was to harm enemies or rivals.

In the Middle Ages institutional Christianity walked a fine line in its attitude to folk magic. The church tried to suppress black magic but tolerated what it considered white magic. It could hardly do otherwise. Christian emblems and medals overlapped in form and intent with talismans, and sacred relics overlapped in intent. The cult of saints’ relics was at its peak, and relics were fought over, traded and venerated in the belief that they could work miracles. Relics were used for the healing of sickness, in both people and their animals; to secure political or economic advantage; and even to sway the outcome of battles. Differences between “pagan” practices and what the church endorsed and benefited from were slight and hard to explain.

The church took much the same stance in its attitudes to magic of a higher level of sophistication. Prominent Christian personages were aware of the Hermetic and Neoplatonic traditions and contributed to the study of both magic and alchemy. Albertus Magnus (c.1200-1280)—Dominican friar, mentor of Thomas Aquinas, and alchemist—criticized “demonic magic” but approved of celestial, or astrological, magic.⁸⁴

Albertus and others of his time learned of the esoteric arts as Hermeticism seeped into Christian Europe through Moorish Spain, southern Italy, and countries bordering the Ottoman Empire. Hermeticism encouraged new perspectives on the role of magic. Traditional medieval forms of magic and general rules of practice were not rejected. But less attention was paid to spells, enchantments, and the like;

and more emphasis was placed on the use of magic for spiritual development.

Closely paralleling these developments, westerners rediscovered the theurgic rituals of Neoplatonism. A ritual might invoke a variety of celestial beings, even God. Parallels were recognized between ceremonial magic and religious liturgy. In the twelfth century Patriarch Michael Cerularius of Constantinople was criticized for introducing theurgic ritual into the Christian liturgy.⁸⁵ The achievement of altered states of consciousness, the permanent elevation of consciousness, and personal transformation were added to traditional motives for performing theurgic rituals.

The Creation of Talismans

Both Hermetism and the Neoplatonic theurgy made extensive use of talismans in their respective rituals. Our thesis is that these and other talismans were the precursors of the Tarot's Major Arcana.

The medieval "bible" on talismans was the *Picatrix*, often termed in English the "Goal of The Wise." A handbook, or *grimoire*, of talismanic magic, it was written in Arabic in the eleventh century, translated into Spanish and then into Latin. The *Picatrix* specifically referred to Hermetic magic, but many of its recommendations could be applied to theurgy and other forms of magic.

A typical medieval talisman was an image, symbol, or other device inscribed on some appropriate material such as on paper, parchment, wood, metal or stone. It could be set up in a sacred space, as the backdrop for a magical ritual; or it could be placed where the desired results were to play out. According to the prevailing wisdom, the person desiring to evoke or invoke power should, wherever possible, create the talisman him- or herself, though expert advice might be sought on its design. Consecration required the services of a magus, priest or hierophant.

A talisman should be created at an astrologically auspicious time. Determining such time required detailed knowledge of planetary positions relative to one another and in relation to the background of fixed stars, particularly

those that comprise the zodiac. Most important was the *decan* through which the planet was passing. Each sign of the zodiac was divided into three decans of ten degrees, making a total of thirty-six decans. Some decans were beneficent, while others were malevolent.

In order to achieve maximum resonance, the inscribed image and text must be chosen with insight into the source of power. Symbolism and color were considered particularly important, taking advantage of the Law of Correspondences. Efficacy could be enhanced by embedding in it gemstones of the appropriate vibration. Frances Yates explained:

The operator who wished to capture, let us say, the power of the planet Venus, must know what plants belonged to Venus, what stones and metals, what animals, and use only these when addressing Venus. He must know the images of Venus and know how to inscribe these on talismans made of the right Venus material and at the right astrological moment. Such images were held to capture the spirit or power of the star and to hold it or store it for use.⁸⁶

Apparently speaking as an authority, Albertus Magnus described talismans intended for specific purposes:

Andromeda is the image of a girl turned sideways, seated upon [a rock], with straining hands. And this image, engraved upon gems that are by nature conciliating in love . . . brings about lasting love between man and wife; indeed it is said to reconcile even those who have been adulterous. Cassiopeia is a maiden sitting in an armchair, with her arms uplifted and bent; and this sort of engraving upon [gems] that bring sleep and restore the members is said to give rest after toil and to strengthen weakened bodies.⁸⁷

A talisman that was properly created and consecrated possessed the desired power and could be used in a number of ways. Albertus offered some examples:

[W]hen the image has been made according to these and other conditions, it should be buried in the middle of the place from which you wish to expel the particular

thing, placing earth from the four corners of the place in the belly of the image. If, on the other hand, you wish to make an image for joy and success, make it at a time contrary to what we have said, additionally the image should be made at a time that has been elected, and it will have its effects according to the powers of the Heavens by the command of God.⁸⁸

Renaissance Magic

Although the revival of Hermetic and Neoplatonic occultism began in Europe as early as the eleventh or twelfth century, interest remained at a relatively low level. At the end of the fourteenth century, however, everything changed; within a few decades those time-honored esoteric systems were propelled to the forefront of attention among the elite of Italian society. Even popes became interested.

In 1434 wealthy banker Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) became de-facto ruler of the Republic of Florence and founder of the Medici political dynasty. A patron of the arts and scholarship, Cosimo established a library, which grew to be the largest in the world since the Library of Alexandria. Italian nobleman Giovanni Lascaris returned from one buying spree in the East with more than 200 ancient manuscripts.⁸⁹ The library became a treasure trove of religious, philosophical and esoteric texts, and the broad range of languages in which they were written stimulated linguistic studies.

Scholars from all over Europe flocked to Florence to study in the Medici library and, not incidentally, to exchange ideas. Already in the city was Georgius Gemistos Pletho (c.1355–c.1452), who had studied at the Islamic School of Theology at Brusa, Turkey. He was a student of Neoplatonism and an authority on Plato and Zoroaster.⁹⁰ Pletho's presence in Florence, along with so many other scholars, inspired Cosimo de' Medici to found the *Accademia Platonica*, or Florentine Platonic Academy. By the time it closed in 1492 the academy had translated all of Plato's works into Latin, along with the *Enneads* of Plotinus, and several other Neoplatonic works previously available only in Greek or Arabic.

Cosimo de' Medici's choice to head the academy was Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), priest, physician, and linguistic scholar. Among his accomplishments Ficino translated the fifteen treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* from Greek into Latin. Like most of his contemporaries, Ficino believed that the *Corpus* had been written by a real, very ancient, Hermes Trismegistus. His translation and accompanying commentary were published in 1463 and reprinted more than twenty times over the next 150 years.

Through Pletho's Neoplatonic influence and his own work on the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ficino became fascinated with magic. But he was dissatisfied with what he considered the crudity of traditional occult practices. As Yates observed, his magic became more refined, more elegant, and in many ways more "spiritual" than that of earlier forms.⁹¹

Ficino and his student Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) orchestrated a transformation in the way magical rituals were performed. Great care went into the design and performance of the rituals. The setting, paraphernalia, symbols, and words and gestures of power were considered critically important, and magi often prepared themselves by fasting and prayer before performing important rituals. Ficino envisioned the possible integration of ceremonial magic into Christian worship—an aspiration shared by Patriarch Cerularius three centuries earlier, and by Éliphas Lévi four centuries later.

Ficino emphasized the role of aesthetics in magical rituals. His talismans—visual tools for use in the rituals—were not the crude images typical of medieval magic but works of art based on classical themes. And his chanted or sung incantations—auditory tools—were accompanied by the best musical instruments of the period.⁹² Historian Gary Tomlinson spoke of Ficino's "musical metaphysics";⁹³ but it seems clear that his metaphysics had a strong visual dimension as well as a musical one. In any event, it is not difficult to see how these aesthetic enhancements of ceremonial ritual could help raise participants' consciousness.

Cosimo de' Medici and Francesco Sforza formed a political alliance that brought relative peace and cooperation between the city states of Florence and Milan—along with mutual resistance to the ambitions of Venice and Rome. At the very time when Ficino was raising the aesthetic quality of magic in Florence, Bonifacio Bembo was painting the Visconti-Sforza Tarot deck in Milan. Some authorities believe that Ficino actually designed the Visconti-Sforza deck, though he may not have painted it. On the other hand, Bembo himself was not devoid of esoteric training. He was influenced by Gemistos Pletho's Neoplatonic teachings and may even have been Pletho's student.⁹⁴

The investment of time, energy and money in hand-painting Tarot cards does not need to be attributed simply to aristocratic extravagance. It can also be explained by the urge to create the most effective talismans possible for use in ceremonial magic, which was rising to new levels of sophistication and spirituality.

Pico della Mirandola shared Ficino's interest in magic, though he treated it more from a theoretical angle and denounced the use of astrology for purposes of divination.⁹⁵ On the other hand, a major focus of Pico's work was the integration of the Kabbalah into Hermeticism. He benefited from the writings of Christian scholars who, from the thirteenth century onward, had come into contact with Jewish Kabbalists in Spain, Provence, and eventually Italy.⁹⁶ Pico's legacy, reinforced a generation later by German esotericist Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), was the “Hermetic,” or “Christian,” Kabbalah—into which the Tarot itself would eventually be integrated.

Pletho is said to have headed a secret occult group, one of whose members was Baslios Bessarion (1403–1472), Latin patriarch of Nicaea. One source claimed that Bessarion, with the help of Pope Pius II and German theologian Nicholas of Cusa, created the Mantegna deck. Their motivation allegedly was the same as the Alexandrian priests' creation of the Tarot of the Bohemians: to protect the teachings against future destruction of esoteric texts.⁹⁷ If so, Bessarion's initiative was prophetic.

Hermeticism and the Hermetic Kabbalah attracted the attention of many Christian scholars, and even high churchmen, in the fifteenth century. But ecclesiastical authorities—shaken by the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453—were becoming increasingly defensive and suspicious. Pico was interrogated by Roman authorities on charges of heresy. Pope Alexander VI intervened on Pico's behalf, when he was elected to office in 1492.⁹⁸ Hermeticists nevertheless saw the writing on the wall. For safety's sake, the magical elements of Hermeticism were played down, leaving it primarily as a philosophical system and a source of prophecy. Pico had already played down the astrological elements.

The Tarot essentially vanished from Italy at the end of the fifteenth century. Its demise may have been caused primarily by war, but the shift of emphasis within Hermeticism may have contributed. The structure of the Major Arcana remained intact, but the aesthetic element nurtured during the Italian Renaissance was lost. The images on the Marseille Tarot exemplified folk art rather than great art.

Talismans in the Golden Dawn and Beyond

Talismans were employed in the magic rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Israel Regardie, one-time secretary to Aleister Crowley, reiterated the need for care in creating talismans: “[C]are should be taken to make it, as far as is possible, so to represent the universal Forces that it should be in exact harmony with those you wish to attract, and the more exact the symbolism, the more easy it is to attract the Force.”⁹⁹ Esoteric historian Mary Greer showed that many rituals performed by members of the Golden Dawn drew their inspiration, at least in part, from Tarot cards.¹⁰⁰ In one case Annie Horniman meditated on a card during a ritual: “I take the High Priestess, the Moon, in my hand and look and look at the figure and imagine it as a stately woman in golden mitre in red gold-bordered robes on a throne with a book in her hand.”¹⁰¹ Regardie suggested copying the content of Tarot cards onto larger talismans:

Some of the symbols on the Tarot cards could be reproduced to great advantage on the talismans, if the student wishes. For instance, if he were making a talisman to produce pleasure and joy, the Ace of Cups in any of the conventional packs is a beautiful symbol to be copied in ink or painted on to the silver crescent of Apas. For spiritual help in the hour of trouble, the sword and crown of the Ace of Swords – which literally means evoked strength – would be an ideal symbol to transpose on the blue circle of Vayu. The need for change in an otherwise dull poverty-stricken existence could well be represented by the Two of Pentacles.¹⁰²

“If the student wishes” seems to imply that the use of Tarot cards in Golden Dawn rituals was not a common practice. That would be surprising, given prominent members’ emphasis on the Tarot. On the other hand, Macgregor Mathers’ main interest may have been divination. And Arthur Waite is known to have eschewed ritual in favor of mysticism. Crowley, who was heavily involved in magical ritual did not publish his Tarot deck and accompanying text until long after the Golden Dawn closed its doors.

Other members of the Golden Dawn saw the Tarot—at least the Marseille-style decks then in use—as a poor imitation of talismans of a more fundamental nature. Maud Gonne commented that four talismans, used by William Butler Yeats and herself in a ritual in Ireland, “are universal symbols appearing in debased form in the Tarot.”¹⁰³ The symbols, known as the jewels of the Tuatha de Danaan, corresponded to the four suits of the Minor Arcana.

Be that as it may, Regardie emphasized the need to consecrate talismans. He likened the preparation of the talisman to the candidate’s preparation for initiation. At that stage the talisman “is nothing but dead and inert material.” It awaits “initiation,” to open the talisman to higher forces.¹⁰⁴ This initiation process could, he said, be achieved through either meditation or magical ritual. A vault resembling the burial site of Christian Rosencreutz, was constructed at the Golden Dawn’s London temple, and one

of its uses was the performance of rituals for the consecration of talismans.¹⁰⁵

Elsewhere, Regardie provided a detailed description of a ritual for consecrating the “four elemental weapons”: the Wand, representing fire; the Cup, water; the Sword (or Dagger), air; and the Pentacle, earth. He related them, as various people had previously done, to the four letters of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, respectively: Yod, He, Vah, He.¹⁰⁶

Aside from the Golden Dawn literature we have few insights into the use of Tarot cards as talismans in ritual magic. This is understandable, given the secrecy with which occult lodges guard their ritual secrets. One interesting insight, however, is provided by a book by Jean-Louis de Biasi. De Biasi recommended study of, and meditation on, the symbols and aesthetics of each card: “the colors, the minute details, any magical words that might be associated with this card.”¹⁰⁷ Creative imagination is utilized to move to a state of invocation, which “explicitly employs contact with a dimension that is not normally a part of your consciousness and reality.”¹⁰⁸

Biasi proceeded to outline the rituals that should be used for each card of the Major Arcana: including its astrological correlate, color, fragrance, gemstone, and plant. He recommended suitable words and gestures. And he suggested situations in which a particular card might be appropriate. The ritual for each card was described in detail.

Unfortunately, Biasi’s rituals were designed, not for the conventional Tarot deck, but for a specialized Tarot used by his occult order. With some resemblance to the Mantegna Tarot, the twenty-four Major Arcana are divided into “Arcana of the Planets,” “Arcana of the Zodiac,” and “Arcana of the Elements.”¹⁰⁹ Biasi’s book could provide the stimulus for the development of more generally applicable rituals or the disclosure of rituals already performed by occult orders.

Reflections and Synthesis

Roots and Evolution of the Tarot

There is little doubt that the Minor Arcana evolved from card games dating back to ninth-

century China. But to insist that they were purely mundane in origin is to project modern understanding of gaming on a culture remote from our own. Mathematical randomness, or its approximation by shuffling a card deck, is a modern concept. In times past, the turn of a card was thought to be driven by unseen forces.¹¹⁰ Today's casino gambler who exclaims: "Fortune is smiling on me"—or: "This is not my lucky day"—is echoing the firmly held beliefs of a pre-scientific age.

A card game might elicit a conversation with a multitude of unseen forces. A lucky outcome could bring monetary gain, but it might also augur success in a hunt, battle, or love pursuit. Card games were tools for divination,¹¹¹ and they remained so, even after modern concepts of randomness began to take hold. Playing cards were used for divination in the sixteenth century.¹¹² Manuals appeared in the eighteenth century providing divinatory meanings of the Tarot cards and describing what we now call "spreads."¹¹³ Divination with playing cards is still performed today, and divination is one of the principal uses of Tarot cards.

A different kind of conversation with the unseen powers could be facilitated by the judicious *choice* of cards. Intense focus on the selected cards, combined with suitable invocations, could mold the future to a player's advantage. Playing cards were used as talismans.

Conflation of the Minor and Major Arcana in the fifteenth century may have filled a desire for more challenging card games. But it would be naïve to think that so many cards, bearing evocative images—created and reproduced at considerable cost—were invented solely for that purpose. Instead, the weight of evidence suggests that the Major Arcana were created for a more important purpose and then were co-opted by game players.

A major thesis of this article is that the immediate predecessors of the Major Arcana were talismans used in ritual magic. The talismans described by Albertus Magnus and others provide hints as to what those proto-Major Arcana may have looked like. Evidence that Tarot cards have been used as talismans in more recent times supports the thesis, as well as point-

ing toward greater appreciation of the Tarot's esoteric potential.

Nobody would claim that talismans closely resembling the Fool, the Magician, and so on, were in use in 1400. As the Besozzo, Mantegna, Visconti-Sforza, and Sola Busca decks testify, considerable experimentation took place in the number of Major Arcana and the images they bore. But the evolution of the Major Arcana to forms we would recognize today was rapid and was driven by factors we shall examine. Experimentation also took place within the Minor Arcana, as exemplified by the Damsel and Lady on the Horse in the eighty-four card deck commissioned by the Visconti family.

The Italian Renaissance saw the convergence of multiple esoteric movements, religious traditions, and philosophies, and the emergence of new styles of art and music. Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, which had remained at a low level during the Middle Ages, blossomed in the new environment and soon merged into a single esoteric system.

New insights into the spiritual dynamics and significance of the Renaissance are found in the trans-Himalayan teachings. According to esoteric teacher Alice Bailey, the Third Ray came into manifestation in 1425, permitting the incarnation of Third-Ray souls.¹¹⁴ Among them may have been Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Georgius Gemistos Pletho. They and other key figures may well have been involved in the ancient mysteries in previous lives.

The Renaissance may have represented a minor initiation for humanity as a whole. At the same time the Planetary Hierarchy raised the standard for individual initiation, as recognized by the Hierarchy. Bailey explained: "[T]he conditional demands of the Initiator (until the period of the year 1400 A.D.) were for conscious soul contact; today, it is for a measure of established relation to the Spiritual Triad, via the antahkarana. . . . A great change in the human consciousness made it possible—in the year 1425 A.D.—to inaugurate changes in the requirements for initiation and definitely to lift the standard."¹¹⁵

The Major Arcana took recognizable form in the Renaissance environment of increasingly sophisticated magic, driven by, or at least taking advantage of, the Hermetic and Neoplatonic revivals. Esoteric teachings now indicate that these interrelated developments may have been orchestrated by the Hierarchy. Since ritual was the dominant element of the western esoteric tradition—contrasting with meditation in the East—the “great change in the human consciousness” and “changes in the requirements for initiation” no doubt extended to ceremonial magic. Emergence of the Tarot may have been one outcome of the Hierarchy’s initiative.

Whether we can trace the Major Arcana, or their prototypes, back to antiquity—in exoteric terms—is more speculative. However, the Greek gods depicted on the Besozzo Tarot fit in well with ancient Neoplatonic practices, and more than ten of the images on the Mantegna Tarot have an astronomical/astrological association typical of ancient Hermeticism. Theories that the Tarot had roots in the ancient mysteries cannot be dismissed. It is tempting, though probably unfounded, to equate the Minor and Major Arcana with the Lesser and Greater Mysteries of antiquity.

Esotericists, from Etteilla and Antoine Court de Gébelin, to Papus and Aleister Crowley, pointed to Egypt as the source of the Tarot—with the strong implication that they were referring to a period in Egyptian history prior to the Hellenic era when Neoplatonism and Hermeticism flourished. One can see Tarot cards’ resemblance to depictions of Egyptian pharaohs and deities, and some resemblance to hieroglyphics. Philologists claim that hieroglyphics emerged in the third or fourth millennium BCE, and survived—despite strong movements toward other kinds of script—until the fourth century of the Common Era. Some 1,000 distinct hieroglyphs have been catalogued.

Hieroglyphics were used for mundane purposes like recording grain inventories and commercial transactions. But they played a more important role in Egyptian religion and no doubt the Egyptian mysteries. Funerary texts were written to help deceased persons navigate

the hazards of the afterlife. They may also have been used in initiation rites involving ritual death. Significantly, the title of the most famous funerary text, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, is translated by some authorities, *Book of Coming Forth into the Light*.¹¹⁶

The Egyptians called their hieroglyphic script *mdju netjer* (“words of the gods”) and believed that it was given to them by the god Thoth.¹¹⁷ By extension, western esotericists from the eighteenth century onward concluded that the Tarot was divinely inspired by Thoth—or by his alleged predecessor, Hermes Trismegistus. Many writers, including Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, spoke of an “Egyptian Tarot.”¹¹⁸ But whether anything ever existed that could justifiably bear that description is a matter of speculation.

Archeologists have discovered rectangular gold and silver plates inscribed with references to the sixth century BCE Persian king Darius the Great.¹¹⁹ And Etruscan plates from the same general period were discovered in Italy. But extant images from ancient Egypt, which could be compared with the Tarot, were either painted on walls or tombs, or were drawn on papyrus scrolls. We have no evidence of “decks” of moveable icons that could be shuffled, or from which “cards” could be drawn at random or by choice.

The rich Egyptian civilization, which lasted through many phases for at least three millennia, was in its death throes in the fourth century CE and had entirely collapsed by the seventh. De Gébelin and the others insisted that Egyptian mystery teachings were transcribed onto cards to ensure preservation. Theories of the involvement of the popes or the Romani are appealing. But more likely the mysteries passed into the hands of multiple ethnic groups, Christians, Jews, and magi of no particular ethnic or religious identity.

Also, many of the ancient texts of Alexandria, Athens, Rome, and other centers of learning in the Mediterranean region found their way into Arab hands and were studied extensively during the golden age of Islam. Arabic versions of

Greek classics and esoteric literature began to reach Italy in the thirteenth century.

Some brief remarks are in order regarding the etymology of the word *Tarot*, the Francized form of the Italian *tarocci*, and its variants *tarocchi* and *tarock*. The term came into use when the Tarot and its associated card games migrated from Italy to France. Speculation on its etymology, beginning with de Gébelin and continuing today, has focused either on the common root *taro* or on the French name itself.¹²⁰ Some authorities claim that the root was derived from the Egyptian *taru* (“consult”) or the Hebrew *taro* (“law”).

Two difficulties confront these speculations, however. One is to explain how the root *taro* spanned the thousand years between antiquity and the Renaissance. The card-game precursors of the Minor Arcana were never known by that name, so any continuity of terminology must lie in the Major Arcana. If, as we have concluded in this article, the latter’s precursors were the talismans of medieval and earlier magic, the real discussion of etymology should focus on whether ancient talismans were ever known by a name resembling *taro* or *Tarot*. That discussion has yet to begin.

Another difficulty lies in the fact that the first card game to use the conflated Major and Minor Arcana was called *trionfi* (“triumphs”). *Tarocci* and its variants do not appear in the record until several decades later. *Tarocci* seems to have received its name sometime after the Tarot, as we know it, came into existence. The real origin of the name, like the Tarot itself, remains a mystery.

Aesthetics

The new interest in Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, at the time of the Renaissance, gave rise to a major transformation in the styles of ritual magic: a return to styles used in antiquity or perhaps the development of new styles entirely. More sophisticated styles of magic demanded talismans that were more aesthetically pleasing, and more “spiritual,” than their medieval forebears.

One outcome was the creation of Tarot decks by some of the leading artists of the time. Only

the aristocracy could afford them, but it was a social elite that dabbled in the sophisticated forms of ceremonial magic. Members of the nobility would have been dissatisfied with woodcut talismans, even for card games. Dissatisfaction would have been all the greater when the nobility participated in magical rituals, where so much more was at stake. Artists were only too pleased to cater to expensive tastes, and enlightened magi saw a way to enhance the aesthetic and spiritual status of their craft. Whether the Visconti–Sforza deck achieved that goal is debatable; perhaps the artist sacrificed symbolism in favor of aesthetics. The Besozzo and other lost Tarot decks of the period may have offered a better balance, but we shall never know.

Ordinary people who played *trionfi* or *tarocci* did not have the aristocracy’s resources; nor would they have regarded any significant cost as worthwhile. They would continue to use cheap woodcut cards. Nonetheless, gamblers as well as aristocrats and magi evidently saw utility in the emerging Major Arcana.

The apparent collapse of Tarot-related activity in Italy, at the end of the fifteenth century, is usually attributed to invasion and occupation of the Italian city-states by French forces.¹²¹ Allegedly, French troops developed an interest in the *tarocci* card game and carried it to their homeland and elsewhere. This explanation of the Tarot’s migration to France is plausible, though the gap of 150 years in the historical record—from the Sola Busca deck to the Noblet deck—is worrisome and raises important questions.

Did, for instance, the social elite of Europe stop performing magical rituals requiring expensive, artistic Tarot decks? We have already noted that ecclesiastical hostility toward all kinds of magic led to a shift of priorities within Hermeticism. Perhaps the Tarot found its way into secret occult societies, like Pletho’s, that preserved esoteric wisdom during times of religious persecution. Or perhaps it moved to countries where the religious climate was more accommodating.

In Cornelius Agrippa’s encyclopedic work on magic, published in Germany, one talisman is

described thus: “a king crowned, sitting in a chair, having a raven in his bosom, and under his feet a globe; he is clothed in saffron colored clothes.”¹²² We can easily visualize it as a court card, or even a Major Arcanum, in the Tarot. Indeed we can see continuity from Albertus Magnus’ Andromeda and Cassiopeia talismans, through the Major Arcana of the Renaissance, to Agrippa’s talismans and beyond.

The Marseille decks that survive today contain twenty-two Major Arcana, with meanings similar to those of the Italian Renaissance. Etteilla, who allegedly had contacts with an unnamed Italian, may have influenced the structure of published Tarot decks as well as popularizing them for purpose of divination. Etteilla and de Gébelin may both have had access to the high-quality decks of the Italian Renaissance.

Yet in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Éliphas Lévi and Papus in France, and Mathers in Britain used the “folk art” decks of the Marseille type. Waite’s deck was a significant improvement, but in artistry it still fell short of the Renaissance decks. Crowley’s deck, published long after the Golden Dawn’s demise was an attempt to reconstruct “the Egyptian Tarot.” Perhaps it is rich in symbolism, but its artistic value is questionable, and some people feel that it has a low vibration.

The power of talismans lies in their ability to generate images on the etheric and higher levels. Creative imagination can take those higher images and bring to bear the full power of the higher mental subplanes. We know from modern esoteric teachings that magic, and probably divination, require the cooperation of elemental or devic beings. Elementals and lower devas can be conjured by the magi’s will and forced to perform. But the dangers of unwise

occult practices are well known, and the karma of sorcery can act swiftly.

The white magician works under soul guidance, with the help of higher devas. These latter can only be invited to cooperate, and they

will do so only if they recognize purity of motive and an environment favorable to their particular vibration. The work of Geoffrey Hodson has shown that sacred music can attract powerful devic beings.¹²³ And more generally we know that high devas are attracted by sound and color, which merge on the higher planes. The use of silver and gold leaf in the Renaissance Tarot decks represented the greatest possible investment that could be made in the vibration of the cards. In addition to their monetary value, those two metals

resonate with the Moon and Sun, respectively, or perhaps with the World Mother—Queen of the Angels—and the Christ or Logos.

The use of Tarot cards for purposes of meditation or divination, or their use as talismans in magical ritual, demands decks of high aesthetic quality. Most of us could not afford real gold, but the decks created by Kat Black and Atanas Atanassov are both embellished with gold paint. For a long time aesthetics took a back seat in the creation of Tarot decks, understandably so because of reproduction constraints. But Tarot cards, comparable in their artistry with those of Renaissance Italy, can now be produced at minimal cost. The Black and Atanassov decks may raise some eyebrows, but they make important contributions to the esoteric value of the Tarot and may point the way to even greater enhancements in value.

In addition to acquiring a suitable Tarot deck, something must be done to bring the cards into vibrational harmony with their user. In medieval times it was considered preferable if the

The Tarot seems to be connected . . . with Hermeticism. Hermetic magic exploited the resonance believed to exist between the natural world and beneficent celestial bodies, or the lives that animated them, It’s methods . . . “presuppose that continued effluvia of influences pouring down on earth from the stars . . . could be canalized and used by an operator with the requisite knowledge.”

person planning to use a talisman prepared it him- or herself. In Paul Foster Case's *Builders of the Adytum*, students color their own Tarot cards. The notion of consecrating, charging, magnetizing or blessing a talisman offers a hint for successful use of the Tarot. One cannot expect the cards to work right out of the box—or straight from the artist's workshop. Another consideration: Tarot decks should not be shared; one user's vibration may be inharmonious with another's.

Digital processing techniques have greatly facilitated the creation, editing and reproduction of high-quality Tarot images. Typically, however, the images are still printed on cardstock. Display on electronic devices might be a logical next step, making cards obsolete. The "random" selection of a card or spread could easily be accomplished. To what extent electronic display would affect the Tarot's efficacy for divination and magic, or even for esoteric study and meditation, is unknown. Moreover, it is unclear how volatile images on a screen, or the device itself, could be consecrated or magnetized. Yet the issue forces us to consider precisely what we consecrate in the case of conventional Tarot cards: is it the image, or the image together with the medium on which it is printed?

The Tarot and Sensa

Based on what we have learned, what precisely is the Tarot, and whence did it come? From their different perspectives, de Gébelin, Papus, Waite, Tomberg, Jung, and others intuited that the Tarot possessed special significance, greater than they could explain or whose historical roots they struggled to identify.

Tarot cards, other talismans, sacred icons, mandalas, yantras, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Hebrew and Sanskrit letters all draw inspiration from those mighty ideograms of Sensa, the language of high initiates. The images may be relics, consciously or unconsciously recalled from Atlantean times, when, we are told, Sensa was shared openly with humanity; or they may have been revealed in veiled form more recently.

In his landmark book, Dorje Jinpa spoke of a horizontal dimension of Sensa—a language in

the ordinary sense—and also a vertical dimension, captured by notions of the WORD: the Logos' creative and sustaining "communication" with his world.¹²⁴ Jinpa made the point that, at our level, Sensa could not be reduced simply to an alphabet, dictionary, and set of grammatical rules; it would extend beyond language, as we use the term, to embrace geometric forms, symbols, and "gestures," or ritual.¹²⁵ The use of Tarot cards as talismans in the rituals of ceremonial magic may take us closer to an understanding of Sensa. It may help us, in a small way, draw upon the power of the ancient language as well as on whatever power is specifically invoked. The need for care in selecting a Tarot deck—or its electronic equivalent—arises once again.

These intentionally brief comments are shared in the hope that further work on the nature and function of Sensa will include a focus on its expression through sacred images, texts and rituals. The Tarot should feature prominently in such work.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to explore the Tarot's origins and complex history, setting aside issues of Tarot symbolism, which are discussed elsewhere in the literature. Selected Tarot cards are reproduced herein to illustrate their evolution over time. The Tarot took shape in Italy, during the fifteenth century, and the oldest extant decks date from that period. During a mere 100 years, the Minor and Major Arcana were conflated, and a set of Major Arcana emerged that have won wide acceptance.

There is little doubt that the Minor Arcana evolved from card games played in medieval China. Significantly, both paper and woodblock printing were Chinese inventions, providing the resources for producing card decks. The westward migration of card games followed the spread of paper and woodblock printing, to India, the Middle East, and finally Europe. Woodblock printing remained the principal means of card production until the development of more efficient image-processing technologies in the twentieth century.

Court cards seem to have been added after playing cards left China. By the time card decks reached the Middle East, and certainly by the time they reached Europe, they closely resembled today's playing cards, with thirteen or fourteen cards in each of four suits. Although specific names varied from place to place, and time to time, the broad meanings of the suits of the Minor Arcana had assumed their final form by 1500.

One of the first applications of the Tarot deck, following conflation of the Major and Minor Arcana early in the fifteenth century, was the game of *trionfi*, in which the Major Arcana served as trumps. Yet we cannot believe that the Major Arcana appeared from nowhere, simply in response to a desire for more challenging games. Neither can the heavy investment of time, effort and money in the artistic Tarot decks of the Italian Renaissance be attributed solely to the nobility's desire for luxury and social status.

The more plausible conclusion is that proto-Major Arcana already existed and were co-opted for gaming purposes. Those proto-Major Arcana were the talismans of ritual magic. Their evolution from the relatively crude medieval forms into the beautiful Major Arcana of the Italian Renaissance ran parallel with increasing interest in, and sophistication of, ceremonial magic. Renaissance magic benefited greatly from the rediscovery of Hermetic magic and Neoplatonic theurgy—both of which were popular in Hellenic Egypt but may have drawn upon the occult practices of earlier periods.

The Renaissance was one of the most dynamic epochs in history, stimulating far-reaching developments in multiple fields of endeavor. We now know that the Planetary Hierarchy took action in 1425 to help raise human consciousness. The elevation of ceremonial magic to new levels of spirituality and emergence of the Tarot may have been part of that effort.

Since the fifteenth century the Tarot has served multiple purposes. Card games using Tarot decks are still played in parts of Europe. But esoteric study and divination have become the primary uses. Tantalizing evidence also draws attention to Tarot cards' continued use in ceremonial ritual. In addition to whatever specific goals such ritual might have, use of the Tarot may offer a way to tap into the power of the ancient *Sensa* language—which, as we have seen, is not only a vehicle for communication among initiates but is also the medium through which the Logos creates and sustains his worlds.

The symbolism of Tarot cards is obviously of great importance. But their aesthetic quality, which rose to a high level in the Renaissance, is also important, no matter what esoteric purpose the cards may serve. We know that the higher devas, who serve as the Logos' agents, are attracted by beauty. Each color is known to attract a particular order of devas. A small, but potentially useful, side effect of enhancing the aesthetics of the Tarot might be to counter centuries-old negative perceptions of this important esoteric system.

Table 1. Suits in the Minor Arcana

Most Common Name	Alternative Names	French	Playing Cards*
Wands	Scepters, Batons, Polo Sticks	Les Batons	Clubs
Cups	Chalices	Les Coupes	Hearts
Swords	Daggers	Les Épées	Spades
Pentacles	Coins, Disks	Les Deniers	Diamonds

* Note that these correspondences are not universally accepted.

Table 2. Major Arcana in the Modern Tarot Deck

No.	Most Common Name	Alternative Name	French
0*	The Fool	The Foolish Man	Le Mat
I	The Magician	The Juggler	Le Bateleur
II	The High Priestess	The Popess, Priestess	La Papesse
III	The Empress		La Impératrice
IV	The Emperor		L'Empereur
V	The Hierophant	The Pope	Le Pape
VI	The Lovers	Love	L'Amoureux
VII	The Chariot		Le Chariot
VIII	Strength	Fortitude	La Force
IX	The Hermit		L'Hermite
X	Wheel of Fortune		La Roue de Fortune
XI	Justice	Themis	La Justice
XII	The Hanged Man		Le Pendu
XIII	Death		La Mort
XIV	Temperance		Temperance
XV	The Devil		Le Diable
XVI	The Tower	The Lightning Strike	La Maison Dieu
XVII	The Star		L'Étoile
XVIII	The Moon		La Lune
XIX	The Sun		Le Soleil
XX	Judgment	The Last Judgment	Le Jugement
XXI	The World	The Universe	Le Monde

* The Fool is sometimes left unnumbered.

- ¹ Arthur E. Waite, *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot: Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition Under the Veil of Divination* (London: Rider, 1911), 4.
- ² Harriette A. & F. Homer Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe: Or a Spiritual Interpretation of Numbers and Symbols* (New York: Dutton, 1919), 75.
- ³ Paul Foster Case, *The Tarot: A Key to the Wisdom of the Ages* (Richmond, VA: Macoy, 1947), 1.
- ⁴ Eden Gray, *The Tarot Revealed* (New York: Bell, 1960), Author's introduction (unnumbered).
- ⁵ Carl G. Jung, "Visions," *Notes of a seminar given in 1930-1934* (Claire Douglas, ed.). Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1997, 923.
- ⁶ Signe E. Echols et al., *Spiritual Tarot: Seventy-Eight Paths to Personal Development* (New York: Monroe, 1996), 3.
- ⁷ Nicole Wendrich, Introduction to Harry & Nicola Wendrich, *A Sephirothic Odyssey: A Journey in Consciousness with the Golden Dawn Temple Tarot*, Llanelli (Wales: Wendrich artHouse, 2016), ix.
- ⁸ Jean-Louis de Biasi, *The Divine Arcana of the Aurum Solis* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2011), 3.
- ⁹ Valentin Tomberg (attrib. to), *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (transl.; R. A. Powell, Shaftsbury, Dorset, UK: Element, 1985), 4. Italics in the original.
- ¹⁰ But it should be pointed out that not all authorities accept these correspondences.
- ¹¹ In Aleister Crowley's Thoth deck, the court cards are designated Princess, Knight, Queen and Prince. In French the court cards are Le Roy, La Reyne, Le Cavalier, and Le Valet.
- ¹² In addition to differences arising from translation from the original French, certain cards have taken on new connotations. For instance, "The Popess" card from the Marseille decks, named for the fabled Pope Joan—and probably intended to offend the Roman Catholic Church—has become "The High Priestess." Furthermore, cards VIII and XI are often interchanged, and the Fool is sometimes placed between cards XX and XXI
- ¹³ See for example Curtiss & Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe*; (Harriette A. & F. Homer Curtiss), *The Key of Destiny* (New York: Dutton, 1923); Gray, *The Tarot Revealed*; Angeles Arrien, *The Tarot Handbook: Practical Applications of Ancient Visual Symbols* (New York: Tarcher Putnam, 1997); Tali Goodwin et al., *Tarot Fundamentals* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2016); Anthony Louis, *Llewellyn's Complete Book of Tarot: A Comprehensive Guide* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2016).
- ¹⁴ Paul Huson, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot* (Rochester, VT: Destiny, 2004).
- ¹⁵ Catherine P. Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards* (New York: Dover, 1930/2000).
- ¹⁶ Mary K. Greer's Tarot Blog: <https://marygreer.wordpress.com>. Last accessed March 2, 2017.
- ¹⁷ Israel Regardie, *How to Make and Use Talismans*, undated pamphlet (after 1940), 7. Online: http://www.oldways.org/documents/ceremonial/regardie/regardie_talismans.pdf. Last accessed Dec. 3, 2016.
- ¹⁸ Migene González-Wippler, *The Complete Book of Amulets and Talismans* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1991), 203. For comparison, in Christian tradition medals, scapulars and rosaries are blessed prior to use.
- ¹⁹ Woodblocking was used to imprint images onto silk, even before the invention of paper.
- ²⁰ The Malmuks originally were slaves conscripted to serve as soldiers. Over time they evolved into a powerful military caste, almost a chivalric order that played significant roles in Middle Eastern affairs from the ninth to the eighteenth century.
- ²¹ Source: "History of Playing Cards": <http://www.wopc.co.uk/history/1/2/3/4/5>. Last accessed Nov. 24, 2016.
- ²² Critics claim that the title of *thānī nā'ib* never actually existed.
- ²³ Images of the Topkapı deck are in the public sector.
- ²⁴ Even the printing of text was prohibited on religious grounds. Printing did not become common in the Islamic world until the nineteenth century.
- ²⁵ Huson, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot*, 5.
- ²⁶ Patricia Corbett & Colin Eisler (eds.), *The Prayer Book of Michelino da Besozzo* (New York: Brazillier, 1995), devotion for January 17 (pages unnumbered). This book is based on

- an illustrated manuscript in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York.
- ²⁷ Huson, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot*, 11-12.
- ²⁸ “Cards” 1–10 depict the social hierarchy from beggar to emperor and pope. Cards 11–20 depict the nine Muses and Apollo. Cards 21–30 depict the seven liberal arts and the sciences of mathematics, astrology and theology. Cards 31–40 depict the three genii and seven virtues. Cards 41–50 depict the celestial spheres believed to surround the Earth.
- ²⁹ Among Bonifacio Bembo’s other works were portraits of Francesco Sforza and Bianca Visconti (1462), and the main altarpiece for the Duomo of Cremona (1464–1467). Some art historians have detected two different styles in the Visconti-Sforza deck, suggesting that a second painter may have created some of the cards. Other historians attribute the whole deck to Francesco Zavattari, who, with his brothers, painted a fresco in the Chapel of Monza.
- ³⁰ Lo Scarabeo: Tarocchi dei Visconti by Dal Negro © 2005 Lo Scarabeo srl, via Cigna 110, 10155 Torino, Italy. All rights reserved, used by permission.
- ³¹ Source: http://www.tarotpedia.com/wiki/Sola_Busca_Tarot#Cards. Last accessed Feb. 18, 2017.
- ³² Huson, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot*, 13-14.
- ³³ Source: <https://en.camoin.com/tarot/-Tarot-Nicolas-Conver-en-.html>. Last accessed November 18, 2016. See also http://www.tarotpedia.com/wiki/Nicolas_Conver_Tarot. Last accessed November 18, 2016.
- ³⁴ Images in the public sector.
- ³⁵ S. L. Macgregor Mathers, *The Tarot: Its Occult Significance, Use in Fortune-Telling, and Method of Play, Etc.* (reprint, New York: Weiser, 1888).
- ³⁶ Papus, *The Tarot of the Bohemians* (transl.; A. P. Morton, reprint, North Hollywood, CA: Wilshire, 1978), 12. The original French edition was published in 1889.
- ³⁷ Several printing runs were made, over a period of years, before the physical quality of the cards was judged to be satisfactory. Source: <http://www.thompsonrarebooks.com/thompson/images/pdfs/waite.pdf>. Last accessed Dec. 15, 2016. See also Simon Wintle, “Rider-Waite Tarot,” September 07, 2013. Online: <http://www.wopc.co.uk/tarot/rider-kaite/>. Last accessed Dec. 16, 2016.
- ³⁸ Illustrations from the Rider-Waite Deck®, know also as the Waite Tarot and the Rider Tarot reproduced by permission of U.S. Games Systems, Inc., Stamford CT 06902 USA. Copyright Games Systems, Inc. Further reproduction prohibited. The Rider-Waite Tarot Deck® is a registered trademark of the US Games Systems Inc.
- ³⁹ Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth: A Short Essay on the Tarot of the Egyptians* (New York: Weiser, 1944).
- ⁴⁰ Aleister Crowley and Frieda Lady Harris Thoth Tarot © Ordo Templi Orientis. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
- ⁴¹ Illustrations from the Golden Tarot reproduced by permission of U.S. Games Systems, Inc., Stamford CT 06902 USA. Copyright © 2004, U.S. Games Systems Inc. Further reproduction prohibited.
- ⁴² Although Botticelli created works for the Medicis, there is no evidence that he ever painted a Tarot deck.
- ⁴³ Lo Scarabeo: Tarot Botticelli by Atanas Alexandro Atanassov © 2007 Lo Scarabeo srl, via Cigna 110, 10155 Torino, Italy. All rights reserved, used by permission.
- ⁴⁴ Huson, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot*, 12.
- ⁴⁵ Wintle, “Rider-Waite Tarot.” See also <http://www.thompsonrarebooks.com/thompson/images/pdfs/waite.pdf>. Last accessed Dec. 15, 2016.
- ⁴⁶ Wendrich & Wendrich, *A Sephirothic Odyssey: A Journey in Consciousness with the Golden Dawn Temple Tarot, and Golden Dawn Temple Tarot*, 2016.
- ⁴⁷ J. D. Rockefeller, *A Comprehensive Guide on the Tarot and Its Cards*, (location not specified) CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, 5.
- ⁴⁸ That said, experimentation continued; the sixteenth-century “Gemini,” or “Minchiate,” deck contained 97 trumps. Some tarochi decks in use today for gaming purposes contain fewer than 22.
- ⁴⁹ Jacopo Antonio Marcello (1398–1463). Online: <http://trionfi.com/jacopo-antonio-marcello-venetian-proveditore>. Last accessed Jan. 8, 2017.
- ⁵⁰ To gain insight into the relative degrees of complexity, consider that the number of per-

mutations of p objects drawn from a population q is equal to $q!/(q-p)!$, where “!” designates the factorial function. The number of permutations of ten cards drawn from a deck of 52 cards is 5.7×10^{16} . The number of permutations of ten cards drawn from a deck of 78 cards is 4.6×10^{18} , roughly eighty times greater.

⁵¹ While the Besozzo deck may have been gifted for use in a card game, we do not know whether Besozzo or his patron intended, or would have approved of, such use.

⁵² The French title was *Etteilla, ou Manière de se Récréer avec un Jeu de Cartes*.

⁵³ Source: <http://meanings-tarot.com/people/etteilla.aspx>. Last accessed Dec. 8, 2016.

⁵⁴ Antoine C. de Gébelin, *The Primeval World, Analyzed and Compared to the Modern World*, Paris, 1781. Translation quoted in S. L. Macgregor Mathers, “The Tarot,” *Historic Magazine: Miscellaneous Notes and Queries*, (vol. 11, no. 7, 1893), 155-163.

⁵⁵ Among those who attributed Egyptian hieroglyphics to Thoth/Hermes was the Jesuit occultist Athanasius Kirchner, author of the influential *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, 1652–1654.

⁵⁶ “Éliphas Lévi” is a translation of his name into Hebrew. *Zahed*, or *Zahid*, (Arabic: “ascetic”) is a title of respect used in various segments of Islam to denote an initiate. Typically the title is conferred by others, but Constant applied it to himself.

⁵⁷ Éliphas Lévi, *The Mysteries of Magic* (London: Kegan, 1897), 285.

⁵⁸ Papus, *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, 12. Papus may have inherited the idea of a connection with the Romani from Etteilla.

⁵⁹ The French term *Bohémiens* recalled the protection given to Romani in the Kingdom of Bohemia at a time when their advance into Europe was generally unwelcome. Because of that protection, Bohemia acquired an exceptionally large Romani population. “Bohemians” carried, and still carries, negative associations, as does “Gypsies,” and modern ethnologists discourage both.

⁶⁰ An itinerant group resembling the Romani visited the Emperor Constantine IX in 1054, offering their services as fortune tellers, ventriloquists and wizards. They were called *Atsinganoi*, a term which originally referred to

a Manichaean sect but had taken on the more general, derogatory connotation of “untouchables.” In 1350, the German priest Ludolf of Sudheim wrote of a group of Romani-like nomads whom he called *Mandapolos* (literally “frenzied”), a word possibly derived from the Greek *mantis*, meaning a prophet or fortune teller.

⁶¹ Papus, *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, 8-9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Clement Salaman, et al., *The Way of Hermes* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 80.

⁶⁵ “Three Initiates,” *The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1912), 17-18.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of Hermetism and Hermeticism see John F. Nash, “Hermeticism: Rise and Fall of an Esoteric System: Part I,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Winter 2009), 39-51; and Part II (Spring 2009), 33-44.

⁶⁷ The *Emerald Tablet* supposedly was inscribed by Hermes on an emerald and discovered by Alexander the Great in Hermes’ tomb, the Great Pyramid of Giza! But the earliest verifiable version is in an eighth-century work by the Islamic alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan. It is in Arabic and written on paper.

⁶⁸ “Three Initiates,” *The Kybalion*, 8-9.

⁶⁹ Aleister Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods*, London: Ordo Templi Orientis, 1936. The book was based on material circulated privately as early as 1904. The complete text of *Equinox* is available at: <http://hermetic.com/crowley/equinox-of-the-gods/>. Last accessed Nov. 27, 2016.

⁷⁰ Crowley, *The Book of Thoth*, 8. This work was published in 1944, three years before Crowley’s death.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷² *Ibid.* Writers in the Golden Dawn—with some justification—promoted the spelling “Qabalah,” contrasting with “Kabbalah,” preferred by Jewish scholars. More recent commentators sometimes use “Qabalah” specifically to denote the Golden Dawn interpretation of Kabbalistic teachings.

⁷³ Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah* (rev. ed.; Boston, MA: Weiser, 1935/2000), 22. We should note that esoteric writers are not unanimous in their assignment of particular Tarot

- cards to paths through the Tree of Life. Furthermore, Fortune's correspondences with Hebrew letters differed from those proposed earlier by the Judaic Kabbalist Isaac Luria.
- ⁷⁴ Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah*, 22.
- ⁷⁵ Gareth Knight, *A Practical Guide to Qabalistic Symbolism* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1965/1993), 51.
- ⁷⁶ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 45.
- ⁷⁷ *Daemons*, as the term was used in antiquity, referred to spirits of various kinds, most of them beneficent. They should not be confused with *demons*, as understand today. Daemons could more properly be equated to devas.
- ⁷⁸ R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (Bristol, U.K.: Classical Press, 1972/2002), 107.
- ⁷⁹ For example, Plotinus proposed a model of the Trinity which competed with—and in the eyes of some commentators was superior to—the one that emerged from the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).
- ⁸⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies*, ch. 15.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸² No clear date can be assigned to the end of “Antiquity” and beginning of the Dark Ages, but a frequently cited one is 529 CE, when the Emperor Justinian closed the Platonic Academy in Athens. Closure of the school essentially brought classical Neoplatonism to an end.
- ⁸³ If, as some authorities claim, the Celtic Church had Egyptian origins, some esoteric teachings may have found their way to Ireland and been absorbed by surviving elements of Druid occultism. We note the role Irish monks played in preserving scholarship while other parts of Europe lay in the Dark Ages.
- ⁸⁴ Albertus Magnus, *Speculum Astronomiae* (“Instrument of Magic,” transl. unknown), ch. 11. See also his *De Mineralism* (“On Minerals,” transl. unknown), ch. 5. Online: www.renaissanceastrology.com. Last accessed Jan. 1, 2017.
- ⁸⁵ Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 162. Patriarch Cerularius is better known for excommunicating Pope Leo IX. Leo returned the compliment, triggering the Great Schism of 1054 between the Roman and Orthodox Churches.
- ⁸⁶ Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 45.
- ⁸⁷ Albertus Magnus, *De Mineralibus*, ch. 5.
- ⁸⁸ Albertus Magnus, *Speculum Astronomiae*, ch. 11.
- ⁸⁹ G. F. Young, *The Medici* (New York: Modern Library, 1910/1930), 197-198.
- ⁹⁰ Pletho's religious affiliations were ambiguous, but he came to Italy in 1438 as an Eastern Orthodox delegate to the Council of Florence, convened (initially in Ferrara) in the hope of healing the Great Schism of 1054.
- ⁹¹ Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 78ff.
- ⁹² Nash, “Hermeticism: Rise and Fall of an Esoteric System: Part I.”
- ⁹³ Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993, 34. Ficino's work is a theme running throughout this book.
- ⁹⁴ Biasi, *The Divine Arcana of the Aurum Solis*, 27.
- ⁹⁵ Giovanni Pico, *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology*. The work was published in Bologna sometime after Pico's death.
- ⁹⁶ John F. Nash, “Origins of the Christian Kabbalah,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2008), 43-58.
- ⁹⁷ Biasi, *The Divine Arcana of the Aurum Solis*, 25-26.
- ⁹⁸ Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 113-116.
- ⁹⁹ Regardie, *How to Make and Use Talismans*, 7.
- ¹⁰⁰ See for example Mary K. Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn* (Rochester, NY: Park Street Press, 1995), 66, 71, 116, 118, 154.
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 398-399. Horniman's reference to “the Moon” suggests that she identified it with the High Priestess. There is no suggestion that she was also viewing the Moon card.
- ¹⁰² Regardie, *How to Make and Use Talismans*, 37.
- ¹⁰³ Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn*, 218.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹⁰⁵ Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn*, 125.
- ¹⁰⁶ Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn: An Account of the Teachings, Rules and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn*, book 4 (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1937-1940), 66-78. The Tetragrammaton is the unutterable name of God, composed—as the noun indicates—of four Hebrew letters: YHVH. Gentiles have

added vowels to create “Yahweh” and “Jehovah,” but we do not know how the divine name was pronounced in biblical times.

¹⁰⁷ Biasi, *The Divine Arcana of the Aurum Solis*, 82.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 86.

¹⁰⁹ More limited information for the conventional Tarot deck can be found in Case, *The Tarot*.

¹¹⁰ Sometimes, of course, the turn of a card was manipulated. Cheating is probably as old as are card games themselves.

¹¹¹ See the discussion in Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards*, 1-5.

¹¹² *The Oracles of Francesco Marcolino da Forli* (1540) provided instructions for drawing one or more cards randomly from the coins, or pentacles, suit and interpreting the cards for a querent.

¹¹³ For a discussion of early examples of divination see Franco Pratesi, “Tarot in Bologna: Documents from the University Library,” *The Playing-Card* (vol. XVII, no. 4, 1989), 136-146. Online: <http://trionfi.com/pratesi-cartomancer>. Last accessed Nov. 25, 2016

¹¹⁴ Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology I* (New York: Lucis, 1936), 26. Elsewhere we are told that during times of cyclical pralaya, “Egos who are on that particular Ray will take form elsewhere on other globes, and in other chains, and not so much on our planet.” Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (New York: Lucis, 1925), 439.

¹¹⁵ Alice A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, II (New York: Lucis, 1955), 269. Parenthesis in the original. The antahkarana is a bridge in consciousness, built by the disciple, linking the lower and higher aspects of mind and providing contact between the personality and the spiritual triad.

¹¹⁶ The “Egyptian Book of the Dead” was not a single text but a series of texts, written over a period of more than a millennium, offering

advice to individuals, some named, like the Theban scribe Ani.

¹¹⁷ Source: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/egyptian.htm>. Last accessed Dec. 7, 2016. The word *hieroglyph*, coined by second-century CE church father Clement of Alexandria, is Greek and literally means “sacred inscription.”

¹¹⁸ Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* II (New York: Bouton, 1877), 235.

¹¹⁹ The existence of these plates has been of great interest to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), who compare them with the plates allegedly discovered by Joseph Smith in New York State. Source: http://www.bmaf.org/articles/ancient_metal_plates__johnson. Last accessed Dec. 7, 2016.

¹²⁰ For example, a common claim is that the words *Tarot* and *rota* (“wheel”) are related.

¹²¹ The Italian Wars a series of conflicts from 1494 to 1559 that involved, at various times, most of the city-states of Italy, the Papal States, the Republic of Venice, most of the major states of Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

¹²² Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (transl.: J. Freake; Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 1993), book 2, ch. 61, 386.

¹²³ See for example Geoffrey Hodson, *Clairvoyant Investigations* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books; 1995).

¹²⁴ Dorje Jinpa, *Sensa: The Lost Language of the Ancient Mysteries* (Ashland, OR: Pentabarba Publications, 2012), 81ff. See the review of this book in *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2015), 102-105.

¹²⁵ Jinpa, *Sensa*, 81.