

# THE ESOTERIC ORIGINS OF TAROT:

More than *A Wicked Pack of Cards*

Lewis Keizer, Ph.D.

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## Foreword

Modern Tarot is not a card game. It is a form of divination. As such, modern Tarot does not originate in medieval Italian card games, although they eventually became mediums through which cartomantic divination was done. Modern Tarot has a much more ancient derivation in the phenomenology of religions, iconography, and in Western esoteric tradition.

Christine Payne-Towler has provided me with most of the motivation and much of the research for this essay. She could have written a much more comprehensive tome, as she is an expert on Tarot iconography and symbolism. But she wanted a scholar to look over her materials and lend credence to the esoteric origins of Tarot. I am honored to comply.

## The So-Called “Propaganda Campaign”

Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett make the following statement in Chapter One of *A Wicked Pack of Cards*:

“(The Tarot pack) . . . is the subject of the most successful propaganda campaign ever launched. . . . An entire false history, and false interpretation, of the Tarot pack was concocted by the occultists. . . .”

A statement such as this is as false as the misguided histories of Tarot presented by Gebelin, Etteilla, and the other founders of Tarot occultism in Western Europe. There was no conspiracy to misrepresent Tarot—only an

attempt to understand and explain it. Eighteenth-century science was at the mercy of its own limitations, just as twentieth-century scholarship will later be recognized to be.

*A Wicked Pack of Cards* provides us with an excellently researched history of medieval and modern Tarot schools, but it does not attempt to understand and explain its significance. It understands Tarot as part of the history of European games, but it has no appreciation of the origin of modern Tarot in the history and phenomenology of the Western esoteric tradition, or as a sophisticated development of effective divination technique. *A Wicked Pack of Cards* provides a great deal of information, but the authors do not have a thorough enough background in the Western mystery tradition to properly interpret their information.



PAPA  
MANTEGNA DECK

This article is intended to refocus academic discussion of Tarot to its significance and meaning within the context of real historical development in the Western esoteric tradition.



### *The Power of Tarot*

When I was a young academic teaching Religious Studies at the University of California in Santa Cruz during the sixties and seventies, I was chagrined at the gullibility of students for naïve occultist theories about history, scripture, and emerging new-age fads like Tarot.

Like the authors of *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, I knew that modern Tarot decks were merely a development of medieval Italian *Tarocchi*. Tarot was not the secret *Urim* and *Thumim* of the Old Testament or the hieratic Egyptian Books of Hermes described by Clement of Alexandria. Yet not only young, impressionable students, but often even intelligent, educated adults *wanted* to believe that the Tarot was sanctified with hoary antiquity.

As I began to have deeper experience and understanding of Eastern and Western esoteric tradition, however, I found myself using Tarot and other forms of divination to touch more deeply into my own interior life. I began to understand the spiritual phenomenology of dynamic psychism, magic, and theurgy. I found that even some of the most recent decks, like the *Alchemical Tarot*, were extremely helpful to me. The readings I did for myself and for others clarified the invisible currents and subtle influences associated with important decisions and life crises.

Many times the Tarot has warned me away from pathways that I later realized would have led to disaster, or it has given me confidence to pursue directions that have proven to be true to my purposes in life. At crucial times the Tarot has confronted me with hard advice that I could have never accepted from my closest friends. Again, it has cheered me with

encouragement for which there seemed, at the time, no basis—and yet, it was true.

Can all this come from a pack of playing cards? Let us examine the historic esoteric influences associated with the iconography of the Tarot trumps.



THE PPESS  
LOMBARDY I DECK

### **The Popess**

The earliest extant trump images date from the fourteenth century, and they include a female Pope. Today we know her as the High Priestess or Isis Veiled. The

Popess was a remarkable image to use during an era when Knights Templar, Cathars, and other religious heretics were being tortured and burned in the Inquisition. We know that the Popess and other images fell afoul of the Catholic Church, which successfully suppressed *Tarocchi* for two centuries, while the game itself was often castigated by Protestant preachers. Why did the image of the Popess exist before the fourteenth century, and why was the Tarot suppressed after this period?

The issue raised by the Popess was theological dualism—the Albigenian heresy—which was the enemy that the Inquisition sought out either among the Cathars of Southern France, the Bogomils of Bulgaria, or other sects like the Patarenes. These were all survivals of a form of early Christian Gnosticism known as Manichaeism. The religion of the martyred saint Manes became anathema after St. August-



tine of Hippo, a Manichaeon of the fourth century, converted to Catholicism and became a founding theologian for Roman Catholic theology.

The teachings of the “dualist” sects allowed women to be clergy and to even hold office as a Pope. During the period of European history from which the image of the Popess survives, the Bogomils were loyal to their own mysterious Pope in Bulgaria, who may well have been a woman saint. Many of the heretical communities of the time relied upon prophetesses and female channels of Spirit to guide them, just as the early Montanists had done.

In the Visconte-Sforza *Tarocchi* deck we find a Popess dressed in the habit of the Umiliata Order of the Guglielmites whose female leader, a Bohemian Lombard, died in Milan in 1281. The image in the deck represents Popess Sister Manfreda, who was elected Pope by her sect. She was regarded as an avatar of the Holy Spirit sent to inaugurate the New Age of Spirit prophesied by Joachim of Flora. This Popess was burned at the stake in autumn of A.D. 1300, the year that the New Age ending male domination of religion was supposed to begin. Later the Inquisition started proceedings against Matteo Visconti for his slight involvement with the sect

In addition to the dualist heretical communities, there was a great proliferation of apocalyptic and new-age theology that had occurred with the advent of the millennial year A.D. 1000. Isolated scholars translated the Latin Bible, and especially the Book of Revelations, into their vernacular languages and read them as ciphers for their own age, which was one of ecclesiastical privilege and corruption. Their insights were privately promulgated, and

secret societies formed to spread reform and revolutionary religious ideas.

From seminal movements like those of Joachim Flora, the German mystics in the line of Meister Eckhart, and the Brethren of the Free Spirit, there developed the greatest political ground-swell that was ever to threaten the Roman Catholic hierarchy—Protestantism. It now dominates much of Christianity, but is still theological heresy in Rome.



QUEEN OF CUPS

EL GRAN TAROT ESOTERICO DECK

The early protesting or “protestant” sects were fiercely persecuted by Rome, which lumped them together with Albigensians, keepers of pre-Christian pagan religions, and the Jewish and Islamic infidels. All of these groups were theologically “dualist” in the perspective of Rome either because they recognized a feminine or Mother aspect of Godhead (Cathars, Jewish Kabbalists, Bogomils) or because they preserved a Gnostic cosmology and anthropology. The Christian dualists were especially targeted because their Christologies were based on the mystic *Imitatio Christi*, a discipleship aimed at ultimately becoming a Christ. It would have been more to call them “unarians,” because ultimately they viewed humanity as an emanation of God that contained a spark of diety and would eventually return to Godhead, rather than a mere creation of dust doomed ever to



be subordinate and inferior.

The Cathars preserved the Merovingian ideal of the Wife of Jesus (Mary Magdelene) and his physical offspring through their concept of Holy Blood, against which the Carolingian revolution had presented the ideal of the Mass and Eucharist as the Holy Blood of Christ. The Eucharistic Sacrament was the priestly means through which the Church maintained authority over the laity. If personal mysticism and spiritualized allegories were to triumph over physical sacraments, the Church would lose its power. That is why later Protestantism renounced Priesthood and sacraments as “Popish” tools of Satan. But the ideal was originally that of the Gnostic heresies, who



POPESS

SPANISH MARSEILLES DECK

viewed human love as the Divine Sacrament *par excellence* and maintained the symbolism of a male and female Christ.

Under circumstances of political suppression and threat of the Inquisition, the wave of revolutionary spirituality that

swept over Eastern and Western Europe in the tenth to fifteenth centuries was transmitted in heretical ballads sung by Bogomil troubadours and in other forms of art, imagery, and iconography. Very clearly, part of this trend is preserved in the iconography of the early *Tarocchi* trumps. The most evident aspect of this iconography is the Female Pope.

Tarot innovator Edgar Waite was the first

modern scholar to propose that the trumps were originally a series of images to convey the philosophy of the Albegensians. It is ironic that Waite should make this observation, since he radically altered the images of the Tarot trumps, adhering to the sweeping changes made by the English occultists of the Golden Dawn to the traditional European images. Waite’s altered Tarot images are those most familiar to lay persons, and yet they are many steps removed from the original iconography. Perhaps the best example of the original iconography to survive the Inquisition is the Marseilles deck, which synthesizes alchemical and other imagery with an Egyptian theme that I’ll later address.

An excellent discussion of the influence of heretical religion on the original Tarot trump images is included in a book by Robert V. O’Neill entitled, *Tarot Symbolism* (Fairway Press, Ohio; ISBN 0-89536-936-2). His chapter on “Heretical Sects and Their Influence on the Tarot” is carefully researched and deserves a wide reading.

### **Tarocchi Iconography and Hermetic Philosophy**

Tarot was far more than entertainment during the period from the 1300’s to the 1500’s when the game was suppressed. It appears among the luminaries of the Church as a means for contemplation and deep discussion. *Tarocchi* cards with trump images corresponding to Hermetic philosophical and cosmological ideals were used by Pope Pius II and Cardinals Bessarion and Cusa in the mid-fifteenth century during a church council in Mantua. The images of Mantegna’s *Tarocchi* include Iliakos, representing the First Iliaster of Paracelsus and other metaphysicians, the Seven Planets, and other elements of the Hermetic-Platonic Hierarchy of Being. Nicho-



las of Cusa later wrote concerning a similar card game he had devised:

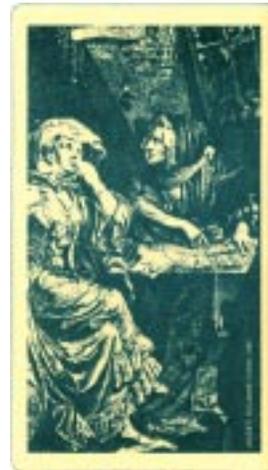
“This game is played, not in a childish way, but as the Holy Wisdom played it for God at the beginning of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

The impact of Hermetic philosophy and iconography on the Church of the Counter-Reformation was considerable. There was a time when many of the intellectuals of Europe hoped that Hermetic philosophy would be the means through which Catholic theology could be reformed to meet the challenge of Protestantism, science, and secular thought. There is still a sealed room in the Vatican belonging to the Borgia Pope that is painted with images of Hermes Trismegistus and other occult symbolism. Statues and printed images of Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, and other legendary adepts proliferated. Hermetic thought struggled with church theology within the Vatican itself, but was overcome by the forces of conservatism by the middle of the seventeenth century, never to surface again.

However, during the oppression of heretical sects and the evolution of the Reformation, new venues for esoteric and occult thought developed within Protestantism and Catholicism. The Knights Templar had been driven underground, but the Priory of Sion lived on as an elite Catholic secret esoteric society with Grand Masters like Botticelli and Da Vinci, whose art preserves the Hermetic cosmology and ideals. The Rosicrucian and Freemasonic movements of Protestant mysticism produced an esoteric Renaissance based on Hermetic thought and its synthesis with astrology, alchemy, magick, and a Christian version of Jewish Kabbalah that used not only Hebrew, but Greek and Latin alphabets. All this, in

turn, was integrated with Greek philosophy and Pythagorean theory.

The scholar Frances Yeats’ book, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* demonstrates the importance of iconography, philosophy, and Hermetic idealism during the period crucial to the development of the Tarot imagery. Alchemists and other practitioners of the esoteric arts transmitted their most profound teachings, such as the evolution of the *Sophic Hydrolith* or Philosopher’s Stone, by means of iconographical allegories. It would be naïve to think that Tarot images were



BACK OF CARTOMANZIA ITALIANA  
SHOWING A READING IN PROGRESS

devoid of such interpretation in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, even though they were suppressed.

During the eighteenth century, when the Inquisition was losing its grip on most of Europe, and both Europe and the New World were rushing toward violent democratic revolution, Tarot again surfaced, not merely as an Italian card game, but as a means of divination. It became a focus of interest for occult-



ists who, like French and English Freemasons, wished to sanctify their alternative spirituality with the authority of hoary antiquity.



MOON  
SPANISH MARSEILLES DECK

### Divination, Cartomancy, and the “Egyptian” Gypsies

The earliest historical record we have of playing cards being used for divination is found in a memoir of the year 1765 by Casanova about

the beautiful young Russian peasant girl named Zaire. She arranged twenty-five playing cards into a magical square and was able to read in them all the details of his amorous adventures of the previous evening.

On the basis of this account, the authors of *A Wicked Pack of Cards* speculate that cartomancy began with Russian peasants in the eighteenth-century. But to assign an origination date to an oral folk tradition, especially when it concerns magic, divination, or herbs and medicines, based upon the date of its first mention in European literature, is unrealistic and quite ignorant of the historical dynamics of oral tradition.

Where did Zaire get her knowledge of cartomancy? Not from books, and certainly not from the French nobility, who in the eighteenth century had just begun to discover occultism, divination, and spiritualism and relate it to their previous flirtations with Hermetic science. No, Zaire’s knowledge came from an oral folk transmission totally

independent of literacy and with a much greater antiquity than the literary products of Gutenberg’s revolution. The source of Zaire’s knowledge was ultimately *Gypsy folk tradition*.

The Gypsies were a unique nomadic nation that left India and wandered to Europe by way of Eastern Europe and Bohemia. They were erroneously considered by Europeans, including Russians, to be a survival of the ancient Egyptian people. They were also known as “Bohemians” because their annual traveling routes brought them into Europe by way of Bohemia, the Motherland of many European esoteric traditions.

Gypsies had their own kings and queens, their own initiatic traditions, and they were experts in forms of entertainment, animal training, and divination for wealthy clients. Methods of divination included “reading” various elements like tea leaves and scrying crystal globes, clouds, sand formations in stream beds, or reflections of the full moon on water. They read palms, used other physiognomic techniques, and they developed various psychic arts that were attributed to Rosicrucians, alchemists, and other occultists of Prague and Bohemia.

As interest in the Gypsy (“Egyptian”) arts developed into European spiritualist fads of the eighteenth century, as the Hermetic (“Egyptian”) philosophy spread through publications of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and various alchemical and magical texts purchased by the nobility, and with the popularization of hieratic Egyptian artifacts like the *Mensa Isiaca* (Tablets of Isis) published by Kircher, all divinatory and esoteric knowledge was attributed to ancient Egypt. Everything from



Freemasonry to Mesmerism claimed its roots in the hoary antiquities of Egypt. Gebelin, Etteilla, and the other eighteenth-century European popularizers of cartomancy attributed the Tarot to the ancient Egyptian Books of Thoth, and the trump images to symbolic frescoes on the walls of Egyptian temples used as part of instruction given during priestly initiation.

The iconography of Egyptian Serapian temples were familiar to Italians. The temples had been built in Italy and Asia Minor during the Roman-Hellenistic period, when Egyptian Isis religion was popular throughout the Empire. A Serapian temple had been excavated as early as the tenth century, and Italians often traveled to see it and speculate upon the meaning of its frescoes and hieroglyphics. During the Italian Renaissance, classical culture was studied and idealized. It is quite possible that *Tarocchi* images were understood as allegories from the very beginning, since the game itself was a kind of medieval Game of Life with reference to archetypal human conditions. Since the Serapian temples were places of initiation into Isis cult, it is also reasonable to assume that their iconography related to initiatic journey through life. To this extent, it is not impossible that Tarot images, which had a similar purpose in *Tarocchi*, had some root in Egyptian temple iconography.

But cartomancy, or divination with playing cards, was not an Egyptian invention. There may have been other systems of divination parallel to the throwing of yarrow sticks for the *I Ching* in the ancient or Roman-Hellenistic world of Egypt, but there is no evidence of anything similar to playing cards. Fortune-telling with playing cards, or cartomancy, was popularized by the Gypsies in medieval

Europe after the invention and publication of playing cards. Because the authorities and teachers of cartomancy were Gypsies, divination with Tarot cards was assumed to be “Egyptian.”

The Sanskrit-related language of the Gypsies was called Romyany, erroneously related to Roumanian. The Gypsies were considered to be spiritually allied to the heretical and protesting religions of Europe, especially the Bulgarian, Roumanian, and Bohemian villagers whose folk religion preserved Manichaeism and

Gnostic elements, and whose preoccupations in the eighteenth century included astrology, alchemy, and esoteric speculative Freemasonry. These included the descendants of the Bogomiles, Cathars, and Albigensians, who had become the objects of persecution and attempted genocide by partisans of the Roman Catholic Church, and whose cultures had produced the wandering Troubadours, who sang mystical, heretical songs to the Magdalene and told stories of the Holy Grail.

As a bridge to Eastern mysticism, European heretics had nurtured the European consciousness that would produce the institutions of Chivalry and Courtly Love. In the heyday of the Hermetic Renaissance and amidst the social upheaval of the Protestant Reformation, the mysterious Gypsies emigrated to Europe



ACE OF CUPS  
SPANISH MARSEILLES DECK



and wandered in large bands. They brought the ways of Indian mysticism and divination with them, and when they arrived in fifteenth-century Western Europe, the romance of the vanquished European heretical cultures was associated with them. They were welcomed for the entertainment they brought, feared and avoided because of the ferocity of their fighting men and women, and often expelled or forced to move on.

They were closely attuned to the animals they brought with them, developing skills in animal communication and training. They traveled in annual migration routes throughout Europe and the Slavic regions, moving South for the winters and North for the summers, providing carnivals or trained animal shows and various kinds of “fortune telling” for a fee. They stayed clear of the regions where the medieval Inquisition held sway, but were often accused of witchcraft.

By the eighteenth century the Inquisition was on the wane. Gypsy lore was much in demand by both the nobles and middle class of Europe. The Gypsies were happy to oblige credulous Europeans with stories of their ancient origins in Egypt. In fact, they called their homeland “Little Egypt.”

### **The Albigensian Paper Making Connection**

Paper making was brought to Europe from the East by Templars and other Crusaders returning from the Holy Land or by Moors in Spain. The earliest paper making centers in Europe were in the South of France and in Lombardy and Tuscany—the areas occupied and controlled by the Albigensians or Cathari. After the massacre of the Cathari at Montsegur in 1244 by operatives of the Pope—perhaps the greatest act of genocide known to history previous to the slaughters of Armenian Chris-

tians by the Moslems in the twentieth century and Hitler’s Jewish Holocaust in World War II—about four thousand survivors wandered Europe like the Gypsies as troubadors, pedlars, merchants, and journeymen paper makers. The persecuted Albigensian paper makers used a secret, symbolic watermark on their “Lombardy paper” by which means they communicated and kept track of each other in different areas.

Interesting evidence of the esoteric relationship between Gypsies, hidden Albigensians, hidden Knights Templar, and the operative Masons are indicated in manuscripts on guild practices created in the Rosslyn Chapel Manuscript Manufactory of the fifteenth century, which is now in the Scottish National Museum and exhibited in facsimile at Rosslyn Chapel which, as scholars are now finding, memorializes Gypsy, Rosicrucian, Templar, Freemasonic, and other hidden esoteric institutions of the period—all of whom were in contact. The St. Claire royalty of Rosslyn were both protectors of the Gypsies and Grand Masters of the operative Masons!

Given these facts, it is quite reasonable to assume that the first manufacture of tarocchi cards was done by partisans of the persecuted Albigensian tradition who maintained close relations with the Gypsies of India, the exiled Knights Templar, and the Scottish Masonic groups out of which Scottish Rite and other “speculative” forms of Freemasonic cult were emerging. This in itself points strongly to an esoteric origin for the Tarot images from the very beginning of their appearance as playing cards manufactured by guilds of Cathari paper makers who lived in hiding.

### **Divination and Other Spiritual Antiquities of the Gypsies**



Gypsy tradition was Indian, but the traditions associated with the Gypsies in the European mind were directly derivative from Roman-Hellenistic Gnostic and Manichaeic spirituality, which the Cathars were still practicing in the thirteenth century. The Roman Catholic polemic against magic and divination that had been successfully and brutally waged against the Greek mystery religions and the Neo-Platonic philosophical schools like that of Hypatia never influenced the Gnostic-Christian religious culture of southern France and Bulgaria. There many of the ancient divinatory practices of Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, and the Hellenized world were not only tolerated, but developed and well integrated into daily religious practice.

We must acknowledge that Murray's theories about the Old Religion of the Witches and its survival in the folk practices of rural Europe have been shown to be unrealistic. Modern Wicca, like modern Tarot, is a recent production with yearnings to an ancient occult history. The European romances about Egyptian Freemasonry, Christian Rosencreuz and the ancient Rosicrucian Brotherhood, or the Theosophical Masters of Tibet were also, in great part, the creations of spiritual imagination. They tell us more about the spirit of their own times than about sacred antiquities.

However, in the case of the Western esoteric tradition and its interaction with Gypsy lore, *we do find strong evidence of historical continuity with ancient pagan and mystery traditions.* Gypsy traditions were strongly Indo-Iranian, thus extremely compatible with Manichaeic and Gnostic culture. In their oral traditions concerning magic, spells, herbs, plants, stones, psychism, and divination, Gypsy communities preserved Eastern folk-

magical and divinatory traditions that were essentially and qualitatively different from those preserved in Western Christian monasticism.

“There is general agreement among occult authorities that the use of the Tarot was popularized by the wandering bands of Bohemians—gypsies—who made their appearance in the late Middle Ages.” (Doctoral dissertation of Thomas Williams for the University of Alabama, quoted in *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, Chapter One). Not only “occult authorities,” but most scholars would agree that cartomancy and Tarot-card divination were introduced to Europeans by Gypsies.

In late antiquity, the Bohemians transferred and adapted their traditional forms of divination to the newly emerging form made possible by the invention of the printing press—the deck of cards. These more ancient forms of divination were compatible with a deck of cards because:

- they relied upon a complex set of symbols not unlike Chinese trigrams, Roman dice, Druidic runes, that could be interpreted allegorically
- they operated by means of randomizing these elements through throwing or casting, as with lots, dice, or yarrow stalks
- they had numerological associations that could be used to amplify interpretation

The symbols of the Gypsies would have been pictographic, although they could have developed into more glyphic representations as did later demotic Egyptian or the Chinese trigrams of the *I Ching*. They would have been etched, drawn, or painted onto randomizable elements that could be cast or thrown, like runes or dice. The numerical system they used would



have been similar to Pythagorean decimal number lore, as it was derived by Pythagoras from Indian Brahmin lore.

Since we can see that the original Tarot trumps were based, for the most part, upon Italian social images arranged in allegorical postures, and that only later were images altered to appear Egyptian or pre-Christian, it is easy to conclude that modern Tarot trump images have no relation to images or allegories that would have been used by the Indo-Iranian Gypsies. However, there are certain original trumps that simply do not have a basis in medieval Christian society, such as the Popess or female Pope (becomes the High Priestess). Moreover, this image certainly does have a basis in both Indian and Albigenian religion as the Gnostic Sophia, the Magdalen, the female Christ, and the Virgin Goddess. To what extent did the cartomancy of the Gypsies influence even the earliest Tarocchi trumps? Perhaps more than we can know. According to some authorities, the Gypsy migrations began as early as the ninth century and peaked in the fifteenth century.

Although Gypsies must have made many innovations when they began to adapt European playing cards for fortune telling, it is also clear that they were able to find attributions for suits and trumps that were recognizable and correspondent to their own traditions of divination. Thus the fact that the images of the Tarocchi trumps survive in various permutations into modern Tarot decks indicates that they were congruent with Gypsy folklore that served as the basis for divination.

### **Iamblichan Tarot Tradition in the French Occult Revival of the Eighteenth Century**

The occultist Court de Gebelin theorized in

1781 that the Tarot trump images originated in the initiatic halls of Egyptian temples. His ideas were popularized by Alliette, later known as Etteilla. But these men were not the originators of such speculation. It was already common understanding in French occult circles, which were essentially Freemasonic.

In the year 1798 there were six to seven hundred Masonic lodges in France containing perhaps 30,000 of the most educated citizens. Unlike modern American Freemasonry, which after WWII became mostly blue collar workers and lost much of its great intellectual patronage, the French lodges were (and still are) subscribed to by university professors and other intellectuals.

Lodges were split between those chartered by nobility and under a Grand Master for life appointed by nobility, and the new democratic form in which Masters were elected for a term. The first form was traditional, and its premise was that the Grand Master was a true adept with all the knowledge and powers of a master. Unfortunately, princes and dukes often chartered unqualified Grand Masters, and the democratic movement in Freemasonry was causing lodges to split into factions. This same movement was attuned to the emerging American colonial revolution and closely tied to its founders. Ben Franklin, for example, was the elected Grand Master of a Lodge in Paris as well as in Philadelphia.

An extreme wing of the democratic Masons were the *Fratres Lucis*, Brothers of Light. Under the leadership of university free-thinkers, they were active architects of the French Revolution. They used forms of initiation that could result in death, based on their ideas of ancient Egyptian priestly initia-



tion. A document probably translated by the nineteenth century occultist Jean-Baptiste Pitois (Christian) and published recently in English by Weiser entitled, *Egyptian Mysteries*, is an example of Illuminist initiatic practice in the guidance of Egyptian lore. During one part of the ordeal, in which the candidate must work his way through a dark labyrinth, he finds himself in a lighted chamber with a bed, food, and a beautiful unclad woman. He has vowed not to tarry, but if he does make the wrong choice, he is immediately set upon and killed.

At this point in the eighteenth century the Lovers trump of the Tarot is reinterpreted according to the “Egyptian” initiatic ordeal, and we see a man with two women—one on his right who is chaste, and one on his left who is a coquette. Over his head is an angel aiming an arrow at him, to slay him if he makes the wrong moral choice. (I would have been dead in this situation!)

Allegorically, this represents the right-hand and left-hand paths, the Way of Life and the Way of Death of the Old Testament, the good and evil *yetzerim* of Kabbalah, or the Pythagorean Motion to the Left versus the Motion to the Right of Plato’s *Timaeus* and the *Kore Kosmou* of Hermetic-Gnostic tradition. But among the *Fratres Lucis*, it represented something quite immediate and final. It is not known how many candidates met their doom in this form of Masonic initiation, but given the proclivities of Frenchmen, I am not optimistic.

Egyptian lodges were established also by Cagliostro who, according to legend, was initiated by the Grand Master, the Comte de St. Germain, in a Templar ceremony using hundreds of candles. Cagliostro introduced the

Egyptian Rites, which paved the way for the later Rites of Memphis and of Mizraim, which competed with the Scottish Rite in nineteenth century America until it was finally banned or abandoned in different jurisdictions. There is now one chartered Lodge of Memphis-Mizraim in New York City that, like all of the later Ultra-Masonic orders, admits both men and women.

The Egyptian paradigm was justified by a medieval document claiming to be part of the body of writings by the NeoPlatonist Iamblichus, whose *Manetho* is the memoirs of an Egyptian priest. The Pseudo-Iamblichan document describes initiatic images used in the hall of neophytes that correspond closely to the Tarot trump images known in the eighteenth century.

This, of course, is the Holy Grail of esoteric Tarot advocates—evidence that the Tarot images derive from ancient and archetypal Egyptian temple images. Currently there are many postings of a document by Michael Poe describing an Italian archeological description of images from a Serapian temple in Italy now under water. The images correspond exactly to modern trumps, with Veiled Isis taking the position for the Popess or High Priestess, etc. I have been unable to contact Poe, so I contacted the Italian archeological museum in charge of the sunken Temple of Serapis at Pozzuoli and asked for any information, as this is the only Serapian temple in Italy I know that is under water. As of this writing, I have no response. But if Poe’s information is correct, we would have an excellent possible source for the earliest Italian Tarocchi images, devoid of Egyptian dress.

Pseudo-Iamblichus was part of Egyptian Freemason occultism that also revived



Pythagorean theory and numerical symbolism as part of their synthesis of Christian Cabbala, usually spelled with a “C” to differentiate it from true Jewish Kabbalah. This in turn was linked to alchemical, astrological, theurgical, and magical departments of the Hermetic arts in the French occult revival.

### The Cabbalistic Attributions to the Tarot Trumps

During this period of intense occult innovation, the Tarot was legitimized among French practitioners as a valid ancient Egyptian divinatory tool. It is not surprising, then, that it is in this period we find Hebrew and magical alphabet attributions made to the trumps. But the Hebrew alphabet, with its twenty-two letters, became the most important system of attributions.

The letters represented the twenty-two Paths connecting the ten Sephiroth. These Paths, then, were associated with each trump image. Some of the Paths were in the Lightning Flash series leading from Malkuth back to Kether, so they were considered to be specifically associated with stages of initiation, while the others represented powers gained and obstacles surmounted at each of these stages.

The authority for the Paths was the Jewish *Sephir Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation. However, it existed in several redactions and versions, each differing on details. The oldest was the Gra version, but it may not have been accessible to French occultists, who depended upon Latin and French translations. However, the French occultists did have access to the Alexandrian/Hermetic attributions—those of the Renaissance magi and the *Fratres Lucis* document. With these, they were able to associate the correct Hebrew letter with the Cabbalistic Path number and image in the

twenty-two card series.

These attribution were added to the Tarot trumps in eighteenth-century France and spread to Italian, Spanish, and other Continental decks by the nineteenth century. They were part of the general Freemasonic and Ultra-Masonic lodge occultism of all Europe.

### Tarot and Cabbala: Levi’s Attributions

In his book, *Eliphas Levi and the French Occult Revival*, Christopher MacIntosh says, “Clearly Levi was in possession of no pre-Court de Gebelin material connecting the Cabala (sic. Ut.) and the Tarot. The connection was his invention.”

This is the kind of fiction about Levi that English occultists have promulgated since the days of the Golden Dawn. English Freemasons declared French Freemasonry invalid in the late nineteenth century when the Grand Orient decided to expand their definition of theism to include Buddhist, scientific, and other non-Judeo-Christian concepts of Godhead or Ultimate Reality. The bad blood between English and French occultism that divided Gnosticism into English and French ecclesiae, Martinism into English Masonic and French ultra- or non-Masonic schools, and resulted in the contemporary French requirement that anyone who joins a Golden Dawn lodge be demitted from French Masonic lodges, has been clearly evident in English attitudes toward one of the greatest French occultists—Eliphas Levi.

In his *Conspiracy Against the Catholic Religion and Sovereigns*, Levi said, “The true initiates who were Etteilla’s contemporaries, the Rosicrucians for example and the Martinists, were in possession of the true



Tarot, as a work of Saint-Martin proves, where the divisions are those of the Tarot.”<sup>2</sup>

Saint-Martin had been a member of the occult lodge established by the adept Martinez de Pasqually in the mid-eighteenth century. He wrote his book divided according to the Tarot trumps before Levi’s era. Later brilliant Martinists like Papus and Oswald Wirth would reaffirm Levi’s assertion that the Tarot was the secret book of the eighteenth century Rosicrucians which existed as, “their criterion, in which they find the prototype of everything that exists by the facility which it offers for analysing, making abstractions, forming a species of intellectual world, and creating all possible things.”<sup>3</sup>

Levi elaborated on what French occultists had already created perhaps a century before, and what was to become standard in all European Tarot decks of the nineteenth century—the correct attribution of Hebrew Path letters to the Tarot trumps. In this system, the Fool was attributed to Shin and the Magician was attributed to Aleph. The Hebrew letters were properly associated with their meanings as numerals.

Just as Etteilla had popularized Tarot for fortune telling based on Gypsy lore, Levi popularized what must have been secret lodge teaching in which the Tarot cards were used as tools of philosophical divination, probably in assumed likeness to the Book T of the seventeenth-century Rosicrucian *Fama*.

### **English Versus French Esoteric Freemasonry: The Golden Dawn**

The founders of the Golden Dawn fabricated German Rosicrucian adepts who had supposedly transmitted profound esoteric and initiatic knowledge to them and given a charter to

teach and initiate others. In fact, however, most of what Mather and Westcott had actually received came from a French source—not German adepts—through Kenneth MacKenzie, who received it directly from Eliphas Levi. Few scholars would seriously challenge this assertion.

Mathers was a brilliant creator and synthesizer who spend untold hours at the British Museum reading magical and Kabbalistic texts. He and Westcott, like all English occultists, were Freemasons. The synthesis they created for the Golden Dawn rituals combined Rosicrucian and Christian Cabbalistic doctrine with the kind of layout used on a Masonic floor. The floor and officers represented Sephiroth, and initiation from 0=0 to 5=6 represented the upward ascent from Malkuth to Tiphareth.

The initiatic instruction given to each Candidate on the Path from one Sephira to the next higher was allegorized on the Tarot trump associated with the Path number in the Hebrew alphabet. Mathers found that having the Fool in the position of Shin didn’t work for his Masonic floor plan, so he decided to retain its number of Zero, but associate it with Aleph.

To justify this, he and later English occultists claimed one of two things: Levi had given a “blind,” or purposely given a wrong Cabbalistic attribution to test people and make it possible only for adepts to discover the true attributions; or, Levi invented his own attributions and was wrong. After all, he was French, not English. How could he be right? Such were the later claims of dark luminaries like Crowley and even the American Paul Foster Case.

As a result, the Waite deck and all other



English decks from that time forward have used the Golden Dawn system of Cabbalistic letter attribution to the Tarot trumps, in spite of the fact that it is blatantly inaccurate. The practice continues because very few modern occultists know how to apply true Kabbalistic principles to Tarot interpretation. Only the European decks like those of Tavaglione use the correct trump attributions, and even Tavaglione presents the Golden Dawn Path attributions rather than those of the Gra.

The Tarot has a distinguished history in European esoteric tradition. It is not merely a card game that was adapted for fortune telling by Gypsies, and then sanctified with occultist illusions. It is a valid and powerful tool for divination that has roots in much older occult systems.

#### Author's Information and Footnotes

Dr. Lewis Keizer was one of the original scholars of the religious studies faculty at the University of California in Santa Cruz in the late sixties specializing in Biblical studies, Roman-Hellenistic religion, and the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic Library. He received his M.Div. from the Episcopal Divinity School and a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His doctoral dissertation, *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth: A New Hermetic Initiation Disclosure*, has become a standard work in Hermetic studies.

He and wife his Willa are presiding bishops of the Home Temple Priesthood and can be contacted through <http://hometemple.org>, where a list of his self-published writings and monographs is available. Keizer is also grailmaster of the Temple of the Holy Grail, which can be contacted at <http://hometemple.org/THG.htm>. Currently he is

co-authoring an esoteric novel with Dr. Eugene Whitworth, author of *The Nine Faces of Christ*, and serves as academic dean for Great Western University in San Francisco, which specializes in distance-learning B.A. degree completion and graduate degrees with emphasis upon metaphysical subjects and the Western Mystery Tradition.

Lewis has written and taught widely in Western and European initiatic traditions, and he introduced male-female Freemasonry and other French initiatic societies to the U.S. Founder of the Popper-Keizer schools and Keizer Academy for gifted students (<http://hometemple.org/ACADEMY.HTM>), he also conducts orchestras and performs as an all-star jazz cornetist at international festivals. He is listed in *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in Religion*, *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*, and many other standard reference biographies.]

1 Sez nec, Jean, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, translated from the French by Barbara F. Sessions (Harper/Bollingen; NY 1986)

2 Quoted in MacIntosh, p. 148

3 Ibid.

