

CHAPTER 17

TAROT

History

“A person devoid of books, had they only a Tarot of which they knew how to make use, could in a few years acquire a universal science and converse with an unequalled doctrine and inexhaustible eloquence.”

Eliphas Leviⁱ

Tarot cards are seen by most as either the origin of modern playing cards or a tool for psychic readers to foretell the future. They do have this purpose, but there is far more to this deck. It was actually designed as a way to pass on the ancient wisdom, through symbol, on the path to awakening. The Tarot has been called the ‘oldest book known to man.’ⁱⁱ Today one may find over a hundred versions of a Tarot deck, still keeping ties to the layout of the oldest known decks. The Tarot is a deck of 78 cards that symbolically depict all the forces that effect human life. The deck is divided into two sections. The first contain twenty-two cards with intricate pictures called the ‘major arcana’ or ‘trump cards.’ The word trump is derived from the Latin word for the Triumph, a religious procession in which the powers of the gods were displayed. The trump cards displayed the powers of the gods in symbol. The major arcana were the greater secrets, that which could only be taught to high initiates who proved their worth.

The other section is the ‘minor arcana’ made up of 56 cards in four suits. The four suits are pentacles (now diamonds), cups (hearts), wands (clubs) and swords (spades). With the exception of one card in each suit (the knight) the ‘minor arcana’ developed into our modern deck of 52 playing cards. The minor arcana represent the lesser secrets, the initial alchemical stages and the wisdom that is available to all. The act of shuffling the cards dispersed these elements into the physical world. No one is really sure exactly where Tarot Cards originated or where the name Tarot comes from. Some say the name Tarot comes from the Egyptian word ‘ta-rosh’ (royal way), a change in letters of the Egyptian goddess Hathor or from the Caballa word ‘Tora’ (the book of secret Hebrew wisdom). Still others say the word originates from Latin word for wheel ‘anagram rota’, while others see a connection to the Chinese Tao, a word that means The Way.ⁱⁱⁱ

The name of course is of less importance than the cards themselves. Playing cards of some sort appeared in Europe during the Middle Ages. By the time of the Renaissance, the Catholic Church recognized the cards as a threat. They saw the cards, especially the trump symbols of the major arcana, as having the power to awaken spiritual forces in people and thus became a threat to their control. The Church admitted the cards were part of a spiritual process, but claimed the cards took one down the ladder to hell. The church banned the major arcana in Germany in 1378, France in 1381, and Italy in 1441. Our modern 52 card deck evolved from the 78 card tarot deck after the ban. However that still left 56 cards. The church also eliminated the Knight cards from the Tarot which they perhaps felt were connected to the Knights Templar, a mystical order the Church had burnt in the 14th century. The Fool is the only major arcana still present in the modern playing deck as the Joker.^{iv}

To most Europeans at the time the cards were not a means of spiritual hidden wisdom but simply the tools for games. When the trump cards were banned, which were the very heart of the Tarot, they had to designate one suit of the remaining cards to be trump. We must do the same when playing older card games even today. Since most of the people who used Tarot cards only wanted to use them for games, not for mystical wisdom, the Church lessened their attacks on the cards even when major arcana decks began to re-appear in the 1600’s. The Church almost seemed to forget about its original opposition, perhaps thinking they had killed all those who may still be able to understand them.^v

Egypt

The first European to openly suggest the Tarot’s connections to Egypt was Antoine Count de Gebelin in 1781. He was the principle of the French Academy and was a student of ancient mysticism. Gebelin believed the

cards were part of the sacred book of Tehuti and he began to explore the hidden symbolism. He claimed the name Tarot originated from the Egyptian words Tar (path) and Ro (royal), thus the path of Horus. Once his interpretation hit the inner courts of Europe many more people who studied mysticism and alchemy also began to examine the cards.^{vi}

Dr. Gerard Encause wrote under the pen-name Papus. He claimed the Egyptian priesthood invented the Tarot prior to rule by the Greeks for the purpose of preserving knowledge. He claimed that instead of passing on the information to initiates in the Mystery Schools, who needed to show high moral character, they decided to pass on the wisdom through vice. By placing the knowledge in the midst of a game, the knowledge would be passed on generation to generation as the game was played. Most would be unaware that they were keeping the wisdom alive. Those with virtue would not be forced to be the secret keepers of knowledge as it would be passed on without their participation. They simply needed to recognise the wisdom when it was in front of them.^{vii} The wisdom was placed through symbol into the cards where it would remain as the Hermetic axiom 'hide the truth in plain sight.'

Another writer, Paul Christian who was born Jean Baptiste Christian Pitois, wrote a book called *The History and Practice of Magic*. One of his chapters is said to be a copy of an ancient manuscript of Iamblichus, a mystic and writer who died in 325 AD. Iamblichus wrote several books on the Egyptian Mysteries. Christian claims to have found references of an initiation ceremony in the Great Pyramid where twenty-two paintings appeared on the walls. The twenty-two paintings are almost identical to the Tarot cards. The question here is whether Christian found a lost manuscript, which would definitely date the Tarot to Egypt, or if he took some creative license to invent a background for the increasingly popular cards.^{viii}

Modern Developments

Over time, more and more spiritual individuals began to interpret and reinvent the Tarot. Spiritualist Eliphas Levi in the 1860's was the first to write of a link between the cards, the letters of the Hebrews and paths of the Caballa tree of life. This became the chosen way of interpreting the cards in the Western World. However, Levi also saw a connection to the Egyptian Mysteries and the untranslated Bembina Tablet of Isis he found in Rome.^{ix}

Two members of the Golden Dawn, AE Waite and Allistar Crowley, developed their own Tarot versions in the early 1900's. Waite believed there was no Egyptian basis to the cards and used his background of alchemy and the Caballa to make his deck, published by Rider in 1910. Some of his pictures were evolved from a 15th century Italian deck called the Sola-Bosca Tarot, which has not survived in complete form. He believed the cards were the steps of the alchemic process of Hermes, and their understanding would create the astral body.^x This is now the deck that is most familiar with Tarot users today. Interestingly the deck most used is less than 100 years old, not the old versions that are more closely linked to the ancient wisdom. As well, whether Waite knew it or not, alchemy and the Caballa both originated in Egypt thus his cards are Egyptian in their source.

Crowley made a Thoth deck, which he claimed was a picture form of the Caballa. In 1927 Paul Foster made a deck that he claimed was closer to the original deck that he felt originated in Morocco in the 1200's.^{xi} Numerous other decks now appear on the market.

New Ideas

There is a belief that the cards have been translated and their numbering system is complete and without question. In fact it was often considered that those who had the exact number system of the cards were expected never to reveal it. Many claimed that those who have written about the cards, like Levi and Waite, were either not truly trained in their meaning or they purposely wrote false information and wrong card orders to throw people off track.^{xii} If this is the case we must look very closely at the manner that people today view and use the cards. I believe there is another way to understand the cards using the concepts of Ancient Egypt.

The cards are usually looked at under the Hebrew Caballa system, where the major arcana are laid out in a series for the initiate from 1 to 21, as if the cards are a specific path to be followed. When viewing the symbolism of the cards in this manner, the teachings do not seem to be in the correct steps. In fact the steps seem way out of place.

In the original version of this volume, I compared the cards 1-10 with their counterpart of 11-20 as if they represented a play of opposites. I noticed the Maya might have also been suggesting the same thing. The field layout for their famed ball games was a checkerboard configuration of 99 squares. The game was not for human sacrifice but represented the energies of the universe and their interactions. Originally more of a teaching

tool for wisdom and not a game, twenty-one individuals would stand on the board. Ten would be on each side of the field, and each represented dual components of the same idea (love-hate, life-death, and wisdom-ignorance). The 21st figure represented mankind who began at the center of the field.^{xiii} This seemed like a confirmation that I was on the right track with the use of sacred number and opposites.

Since that writing, I have gained new insights that the cards are not laid out in a path at all, but are numbered based on a specific internal numbering system within us. The cards are aspects of ourselves, and the cards (hence the numbers) interplay with each other in different ways. Thus the cards can be looked at in any order. Each of us has a predilection to one number as our main focus in this life, and understanding this helps the student and teacher to devise the proper teaching sequence most suited to that individual. There are also certain cards (people) that have a predilection for other cards (people) thus they work well together. Together all 21 cards (people) make the perfect “group” where every aspect of being and awareness can be combined to make a manifested outer world whole. As well of course is the understanding that there really is no path at all. One does not become a warrior, but either is one or is not in this moment. One does not become a Buddha, they either are or they aren’t. The mind can not understand this, only the heart can, and these cards are meant to be understood by the heart thus to view them as a “path” will take the student way from the meanings of the cards. Any card will do, and in any order- but remember there is a specific way they do interact with the other cards as there is a way that our elbow interacts with our wrist.

Given this new insight I had a hard time as to whether to include anything of the previous descriptions of the cards- given that in a forthcoming book I will do so in more detail. I decided for the sake of continuity to keep this very brief overview and not confuse the reader any further. For now if Tarot cards interest you, use them in personal study. Look at them, meditate with them and try to put the wisdom they explain into your day-to-day existence.

- i Gray, Eden *The Tarot Revealed* (Signet 1960) P.225
- ii Gray p.12
- iii Giles, Cynthia *The Tarot* (Paragon 1992) pp. xii, 5; Hauck pp.335-37
- iv Hauc, pp.337-38
- v Giles p.64; Hauck p.338
- vi Hall p.74; Giles p.23
- vii Laviolette p.143; Giles p.35
- viii Laviolette p.129; Giles p.33
- ix Sharmon-Burke, Juliet *Understanding the Tarot* (Stoddart 1998) p.9; Giles p.28
- x Giles p.55; Hauck p.336
- xi Giles p.55
- xii Giles p.38
- xiii Tompkins *Mexican Pyramids* (Harper and Row 1976) p.386

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