

## The Tarot Cards

by

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The strange, weird-looking cards known as the Tarot, with their bizarre designs, have interested and puzzled archaeologists, mystics and occultists for over a century; and many books have been written, from ponderous and learned tomes to popular manuals, from M. Court de Gebelin's *Monde Primitif* in 1781 to Mr A. E. Waite's *Key to the Tarot* in 1910. Yet the mystery remains unsolved. What was their origin? What do they mean? Are they primarily an occult treatise told in hieroglyphics, or merely the implements of a game of chance or skill, used as an afterthought for purposes of divination? Was their origin Egyptian, or Indian, or Chinese, or some as yet unguessed source? There is no reliable evidence, though there is plenty of bold assertion. The fact remains that we know they existed in the fourteenth century, and prior to that they are wrapt in impenetrable obscurity. Having read all the books, I could get access to on the subject, and studied many theories and speculations, I finally arrived at the Scottish verdict of "Not proven." Under these circumstances I should hesitate to intrude into the distinguished, circle of writers on the Tarot, even to the extent of an article, but that it so chances that I have one or two slight contributions to the study, which may be of interest to inquirers.

Many years ago it was my privilege to examine at leisure the magnificent collection of playing cards made by my friend, Mr George Clulow, one of the greatest living experts on the subject. That collection is now in America, where I am told it is the model for all such collections. The item that chiefly interested me was a splendid series of Tarot packs of all ages and all countries. And the point that struck me most was the continuance of the designs throughout, often it is true corrupted, where an ignorant engraver, copying from a copyist, and obviously unable to understand a symbol, had expressed it by an unmeaning flourish, or substituted a flower, or some object he was acquainted with, for an uncomprehended symbol. Thus the Bateleur who in the oldest examples had magical implements before him, came to have a shoemaker's tools. But by comparison of one pack with another these could easily be rectified. Occasionally some local or political cause had produced variations, but these also were detected without trouble. One such occurs in a modern French pack in my possession, where a strong antipapal bias has occasioned the substitution of the figures of Juno and Jupiter for the original La Papesse and Le Pape. Now and then some enterprising innovator has redrawn the entire pack to suit his own ideas of the symbology, as did the fantastic perquier Alliette, who under the pseudonym Etteilla (being his own name spelt backwards) posed as an illuminated adept. But these have attained no vogue, and are now merely of interest to collectors, for they embody, not the ideals, whatever they may be, of the old Tarot, but only Etteilla's notion of what they ought to be. Discounting however these variants, the persistence of the designs through some five centuries, and many countries, is, to say the least of it, remarkable. And whether or no those designs are comprehensible, one feels thankful that the redrawers have not succeeded in displacing the old traditional patterns.

That the cards have long been used in Italy, and perhaps elsewhere, for a game is certain, and that before ever they were written about as occult emblems or implements of divination. Lord Mahon, in his *History of the Forty-Five*, quotes an English lady who met Prince Charles Edward in Rome in 1770 at the Princess Palestrini's, when he asked her if she knew the game of Tarocchi, and she spoke of his handling the Tarot cards and explaining them. But one may conclude from the designs that they were originally intended for more than this. As played in Italy today the 22 Atus or Trumps are often omitted, and many packs are sold without these. But taking the ordinary pip cards, if they were simply used for a game, the ancient designs, which have persisted through so many years and in divers countries, would seem meaningless. The numbers of pips as in the common English packs would be sufficient. Why, for example, should the two of pentacles have a serpent coiled round the two pips in the form of the algebraic symbol of infinity. And here we may say that those well-meaning writers who have redrawn the cards have gone on the wrong tack. Admitting that we have no evidence of the original meaning (there may or may not be a secret tradition, I wish to make no assertion as to this) it is surely the part of wisdom to preserve the ancient symbol as clearly as we can, and await enlightenment, rather than to assume a meaning, and form a new symbol consonant thereto, which may be miles away from the primitive intention.

This at all events was the thought that came to me on examining Mr Clulow's wonderful collection, and noting the persistence of the designs, and the variants of which I have spoken.

With regard to the 22 Atus or Trumps the case is different. It would be impossible in the compass of a single article to go into all the various interpretations that have been put upon them, nor am I sure that it would serve any good purpose to do so. In the absence of evidence as to the intention of the original designer they must remain as merely the speculations of individual writers. But there is much to be said for the idea of Eliphaz Lévi that they were to be referred to the Hebrew alphabet. Students of the Qabala, who are familiar with the symbology of the Hebrew letters, have often been struck with the correspondence of some of the Atus with some of the letters. There can be no doubt that these cards are hieroglyphics of some kind, though the meaning seems to be in dispute; but whether they represent a series, such as the history of the soul, or cosmical evolution, or the grades of training of an initiate, or a synthesis of all of these and possibly others, there seems no positive evidence, but a great wealth of speculation. The connection with the Hebrew alphabet would largely depend on the attribution, and as twenty-one out of the twenty-two cards are numbered, the position assigned to the card marked zero called le Mat, or the Fool, must be the crucial point; and as to this there is wide divergence among the commentators. The wise student will maintain an open mind, and wait for further evidence; Eliphaz Lévi appears to take one a certain distance, and then slams the door in one's face, but whether because he did not know, or whether, knowing the secret tradition, he was unable to tell more, who shall say? In any case all are agreed as to the fascinating quality of his work, and undoubtedly no one can read it without having his interest profoundly stirred in these ancient cards.

It is generally supposed that they were unknown in France, or at all events in Paris, prior to M. Court de Gebelin, who it is said, found and introduced them to the French occultists. This, however, may be doubted. I have in my possession a French Tarot of the early eighteenth century, a very interesting feature of which is that some of the cards have MS inscriptions of their meaning, and apparently the records of an experiment in divination, which from internal evidence would seem to be Pre-Revolution. This, so far as it goes, would support the theory that they were known in France before M. de Gebelin wrote about them. I would not, however, press this further than as a warning against too confident dogmatism concerning the date of the Tarot, and the history of its introduction into Europe.

The cards have been called the "Tarot of the Bohemians", and have often been popularly spoken of as the gipsy fortune-telling cards. As a fact, however, when gipsies lay the cards for the fortune of an inquirer it is the ordinary pack that is used, and it seems certain, as Mr Waite points out, that the Tarot cards were known in Europe before the arrival of the gipsies. Moreover gipsy folklorists, with the exception of Vaillant, have very little to say about the Tarot.

The only evidence on this head that has come under my own observation was from a woman of pure Romani blood, whom I knew many years ago, a Mrs Lee, but of what tribe I cannot say; she was reputed to be an Epping Forest gipsy, but she said herself that her people belonged to Norwood, and only left there when Norwood became a wilderness of villadom, and their old haunts were desecrated by the incursion of Cockney residents. She once showed me an old tattered and much thumbed Tarot pack, of the ordinary Italian design, and told me that these were the cards she used among her own people, but never for Georgios. She also gave me the principles of interpretation, not under any seal of secrecy, but with a general request that it should not be published, and this, needless to say, I have honourably observed. I may, however, state that it was a thoroughly logical and complete system, the four suits representing the four elements, and the four temperaments, and being judged according to their position. Thus wands representing fire and the sanguine temperament, a wand card occurring in a bad position would indicate danger from rash and hasty action, anger, or quarrelling; the same card in a good position would show noble and generous action, courage, energy, and the like. Curiously enough the numbers of the pips were interpreted on a system very much akin to the Pythagorean system of numbers, especially in regard to the occult meaning of odd and even numbers. Mrs Lee laid particular stress on the arrangement of the pips on the cards, pointing out its similarity to the arrangement of spots on dice and dominoes. (The connection of this with the Pythagorean system is obvious.) In the light of this explanation the appropriateness of the serpent in the design of the two of pentacles is manifest.

Whether Mrs Lee's explanations were common to the gipsy tribes, or merely a system of her own, I cannot say. She seemed to regard it as very private, and only shown to me as a special mark of favour.

The last time I saw Mrs Lee was some twenty years ago at Yetholm, when the son of the late Queen Esther was crowned Gipsy King. Mrs Lee was very contemptuous of the Yetholm gipsies—"Tinker trash," she said, "not a hundred words of Romani among the lot." This, however, may well have been the prejudice of a different tribe.

I was interested to find that what she told me of the Tarot was well known to another friend of mine, the late Mrs Florence Farr Emery, who herself claimed Romani descent, and had a great store of strange learning. She it was who first pointed out to me the correspondence of the interpretations of the pip cards with the Pythagorean system, greatly to my delight, for the meanings usually ascribed to the cards had seemed merely empiric, and founded on no system, as indeed are the meanings ascribed to cards by the ordinary type of fortune-teller today. More doubtful were Mrs Emery's suggestions of Egyptian correspondences. She was a diligent student of Egyptology, though perhaps not quite as much of an authority as her friends claimed, and with natural enthusiasm was apt to see ancient Egypt everywhere.

Another unexpected gleam of light came to me from a friend of the late Charles Godfrey Leland, who told me that Leland had some special knowledge of a peculiar system of Gipsy Cartomancy, which for reasons known to himself he was not at liberty to divulge, and of a special pack of cards used by them. The friend who told me this had never seen the cards, but from the evidence of the Tarot pack shown me by Mrs Lee it seems more than likely that these were in fact the Tarot cards, and that the interpretation thereof had been communicated as a secret to Leland. So then there appears to be a probability, in spite of the scepticism of the folklorists, that the connection of the Tarot with the gipsies may have a solid foundation in fact, and on this also we must await further evidence.

Meanwhile a guess may be hazarded that, although the cards arrived in Europe before the gipsies, they may yet have a common origin. Both the tribe and the cards arrived roughly about the same lime, from an utterly unknown and mysterious source; and though the cards arrived first, there is no evidence to show that they did not come from the same origin. This will be a problem for future investigators, and a problem that I would humbly suggest is to be solved, not by negations, but rather by careful and open-minded examination of all the minutest traces of evidence available. It may be perfectly true to say there is no evidence of the Egyptian origin either of the cards or the people. But like other negations it takes us no farther. It may be right to deprecate the hasty dogmatism and superstition of those who proclaim loudly, on the very slenderest authority, that the secrets of the Universe have been laid bare, and the key to universal knowledge is in the hands of some certain mystic writer or teacher, who poses as a divinely inspired final authority and revealer of mysteries. There be many such nowadays, specially of the discredited German brand. But in this depreciation we should beware of falling into the opposite error, and because there is no proof, rashly assume that there is no evidence. It is by the patient examination of minute, almost invisible, and nearly obliterated traces, that true scientific investigation triumphs at length. There are traces, faint and infinitesimal it is true, of an Egyptian origin both of the gipsies and of the Tarot cards; and until some clearer indications of another origin are discovered it is wisdom to preserve these, and make the most of them, examine them with minutest care and search for others, meantime not neglecting any other clues pointing in any other direction. Above all, the careful examination of the designs of the cards, from the very earliest that can be discovered, with all their variants, must be an essential part of the inquiry. No good end can be served by redrawing the cards, however skilfully or artistically it is done. They will remain nothing but an evidence of the taste, and skill, and opinions of the artist, or his inspirer. But anyone who can in any way contribute to a reproduction of the original designs as they were, not as he thinks they ought to be, will do a real service to the study of the Tarot. Even the well-known and accepted symbols on the best of the current packs, well-drawn and coloured, and well printed to replace the crude and poor examples which are the best we can get now, would be a boon to Tarot students, and would demand neither archaeological nor mystic learning.

In common with many Tarot students I welcomed Mr Waite's little manual, and found therein as I expected, and as one always expects from his work, the result of careful research, set forth in graceful and elegant diction, an invaluable summary for those who have not the time or the patience, perhaps not the opportunity, to study the original works, of which he gives an excellent bibliography. But after all it carries one very little farther. *En passant* I was rather surprised that he should have taken the swords of the Tarot as the prototypes of clubs. So learned and accurate a writer must have had some authority for this statement, but none is given, and the obvious idea that in Italian swords is spadi, and the form of the pips in modern cards suggest a conventionalized drawing of the Roman broad sword, is not so much as alluded to. The original symbology as I

have said remains unknown, and is open to any conjecture, but it must be said that the form of the club pip is singularly unlike a bludgeon or quarter staff. But if we take the suit of denarii, or pentacles, to represent earth forces, and suggest that money or coins might symbolize material powers, and that the clover or trefoil leaf, as a product of the earth, might also symbolize the earth forces, it might be as good symbology as the derivation of bludgeons from swords. In any case it seems to be generally assumed the cups are the prototypes of hearts, and sceptres of diamonds, and if swords or spadi became spades, there is only left the correspondence of Pentacles with modern clubs.

There are then three ways in which we may regard the Tarot cards. Firstly the most obvious, as implements of a game of chance or skill, and this is only historically interesting. Secondly as a book of hieroglyphics, revealing, if properly interpreted, some great mystic truths. It may be some cosmogony, or history of evolution, either of the universe, or the human soul. And thirdly as a means of divination. Clearly the second of these depends entirely on our having the correct order of the cards; and as to this at present no light comes from antiquity, and modern authorities differ, as we have seen. The third, or divinatory use, depends on the chance laying down of the cards, the order in which they turn up after certain prescribed shufflings and cuttings by the querent. Mr Waite inclines to the belief that the series of 22 Atus, or Trumps, were solely referred to the second of the above ways of regarding the cards; and the 56 pip cards, which he calls the lesser Arcana, were for no other use than for divination or fortune telling. This may be correct. Certainly there are examples of the Atus alone without the pip cards, and there are packs of pip cards sold now in Italy for the playing of Tarocchi with no Atus. Yet there are early examples in Mr Clulow's collection of packs containing both, and clearly related. One form at least of the game is played with both, the Atus have a very special power justifying their name of trumps; and certainly also the system of divination shown to me by Mrs Lee made use of both. I can only say that after examining all the evidence—that cited by Mr Waite as well as some others—I have myself come to a different conclusion, but I consider the point still open to investigation.

As to divination or fortune-telling, there are many ways of laying out the cards; I have myself been shown over a dozen, and I am persuaded there are many more, some of them peculiar to individual diviners. The first method described by Mr Waite has long been familiar to me. It was sometimes used among others by Mrs Florence Farr Emery, but the divinatory meanings were entirely different. Rightly or wrongly they were logically formed by the combination of the general meaning of the suit with the mystic properties of numbers, which Mr Waite apparently disregards. This divinatory meaning is broadly borne out by the old symbolic designs. The theory, therefore, is that the Tarot was in its origin a symbolic book, whose meaning can now only be remotely guessed at; that the original designers worked upon the fourfold division of all created things, whereof well-known examples are the four beasts of Ezekiel's vision, and of the Apocalypse, the four cherubim, the four archangels, the four letters of tetragrammaton, and many others; to which they added the mystic virtues of numbers, and upon each page of the book they placed a symbolic design still further to elucidate it. Each page on this theory would in fact form a chapter in the book, describing the good and evil influences operating from the spiritual on the material world. By the theory of divination the process of shuffling and cutting the cards according to the prescribed method would indicate the influences operating on the querent. We may perhaps compare the symbolic designs to the vignettes illustrating chapters in the Egyptian Book of the Dead.