



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TAROT



Tarot has been developing and changing throughout the ages and across nations since the invention of paper first reached Europe. It still bears the marks of even earlier games from which it developed. Firstly came dice, which later developed into dominoes, which were then to develop into Chinese playing cards, games that were all based on the hierarchy of numbers.

Dice can be traced back to China and India reaching back to at least 3000 BCE. Dice was also a game of value and has been used since earliest times as a form of both fortune telling and gaming. The term 'pips' were the traditional name for the numbered cards in tarot. It was also the word used to denote the dots on dice and dominoes. That the dots on a dice add up to 21 is also a clue, perhaps being a source of the 21 numbered trump cards. The first pip card in tarot and playing cards is referred to as 'Ace'. This originally also came from dice, referring to the side with one pip, derived from the latin word for 'unit'.

As the Chinese were the first to invent paper, they have the oldest examples of card games, some of which already had the familiar court-based hierarchy of royal retainers and four suits that we recognise from modern cards. The idea of trick taking, or trumping one card over another, was also already an inherent part of the game.

The Chinese cards have had a clear influence upon playing cards used by Arabic people who came to power in Egypt sometime in the early 1300s, forming the Mamluk Empire. They adapted the images to their own needs and culture, interpreting the Chinese images in their own way. The Crusades that took place at this time very likely had a large role to play in their dissemination into Europe. These cards had familiar elements, such as four suits adapted from the Chinese face cards showing ministers and kings, but lacked the trump cards used in tarot.

Playing cards entered Europe through the ports of Spain and Italy. By this time the first paper mills and printing presses had arrived in Italy and France, allowing card games of all sorts to proliferate among the populace.

TAROT OF MILAN

The earliest tarot-like deck we know of was commissioned by Duke Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan, around 1425. The humanist scholar and astrologer Maurizio da Tortona, was asked to devise an allegorical card game based on virtues and temptations for the Duke. The deck had four suits, with four extra cards depicting classical gods in each suit. There are no surviving examples of this deck so no one knows how it looked.

Later, around 1450, other decks were commissioned by Visconti. Many of these have survived and are beautifully embossed with gold, showing delicately painted figures.

The *Cary-Yale Sheet* (c. 1500), also from Milan, is a sheet of uncut trump cards, which are the earliest example of what would be known as the *Tarot de Marseille*.

1. **The Elements:** Each suit represents one of the four elements — fire, air, water and earth. These were said to be the first things that were created from the void, thus this is the first and outermost sphere.
2. **The Stars:** From these fundamental parts came a greater order—the stars and the universe—represented here by the constellations of the zodiac. This is the second sphere.

Then came the planets (seven were known to the ancients). Each was an aspect of the Divine expressing itself in a planetary form. Each has its own tendencies, qualities and affinities, and are the sources of humanity's varying natures.

3. **Saturn:** The slowest and coldest planet is identified with old age, wisdom, time and discipline. He is the grandfather of the gods from which they all sprang, and rules the third sphere.
4. **Jupiter:** The king of the planets. He represents leadership, oversight, male sexuality and the will. He rules the fourth sphere.
5. **Mars:** The god of war signifies aggression, action and courage. He rules the fifth sphere.
6. **The Sun:** Represents harmony, healing, health and happiness, consciousness, balance and justice. It rules the sixth sphere.
7. **Venus:** The goddess of love, beauty, sex and marriage. She rules the seventh sphere.
8. **Mercury:** This small, fast-moving planet demonstrates dynamic processes, and is associated with the god of

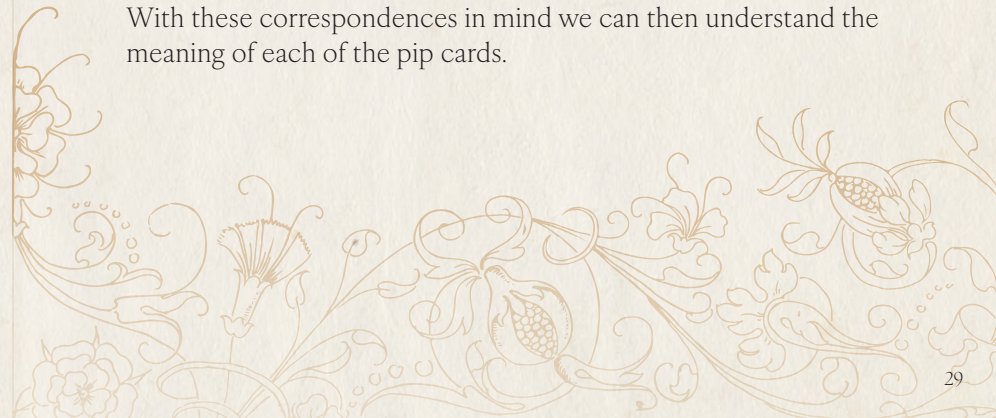
merchants, magic, cleverness and writing. He rules the eighth sphere.

9. **The Moon:** Linked to the feminine cycles of womb and birth, water and growth, the unconscious mind, emotion and intuition. It rules the ninth sphere. The elements that were originally generated in the stars are now condensed into matter and can be used for the formation of life.
10. **Earth:** Like the Moon, Earth was traditionally seen as a goddess of fecundity, related to solidity, nurturing, mothers and abundance of life in general. This is the tenth and innermost sphere.

The numbers now assigned to the planets follow an ancient logic, one followed for thousands of years and still used today. For example, the military headquarters in the US is called 'The Pentagon', a five-sided building. The architects surely knew that this was the number of the planet Mars, the god of war.

As the numbers unfold, form is created according to the rules of Pythagorean or sacred geometry — number as shape, and shape as number. This can be seen in the geometric construction of the underlying compositions of the illustrations.

With these correspondences in mind we can then understand the meaning of each of the pip cards.



CHAKRAS AND THE ZODIAC

The hermetic doctrine ‘as above, so below’ informs the correspondence of the planets to the chakras, or spiritual centres of the body. Yogic mystics used an astrological system based upon similar premises of the Sumerian and Egyptian traditions — that of the fundamental polarity of ‘sky and earth’ or ‘night and day’. The solar/masculine signs and the lunar/feminine signs divide the sky in half from pole to pole and—in an act of poetic genius—divide the individual human also into masculine and feminine halves, a doctrine also found in alchemy.

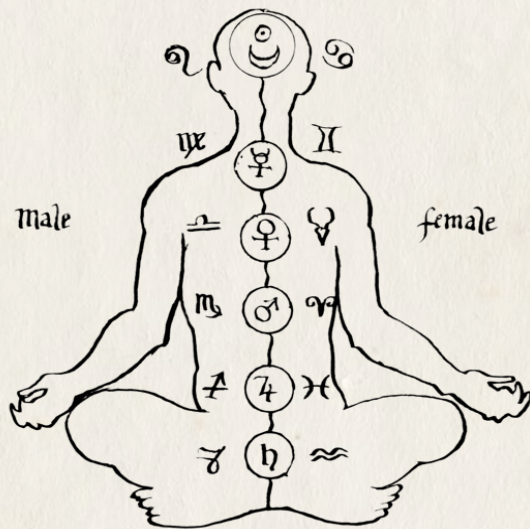


Figure 6: The Yogic system of the chakras and their traditional relationship to the planets and constellations.

In Figure 6 (above), we see the arrangement of the planets and their corresponding zodiac signs with the seven major chakras on the *shushumna*. This is the system used by Goswami Kriyananda of the Kriya Yoga tradition and is mentioned by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*. The planets follow the modern order, minus Earth, with the Moon and Sun grouped together.

The crown chakra corresponds with the Sun and the third eye chakra with the Moon. As the Sun is traditionally seen as an active principle aligned with daytime, and the Moon as passive and aligned with the night, we can interpret each constellation accordingly. Each chakra can be seen to consist of three qualities:

- * A right-hand path corresponding to the masculine and its corresponding zodiac sign.
- * A middle path, being balanced and represented by a planet.
- * A left-hand path corresponding to the feminine and its corresponding zodiac sign.

For example, the throat chakra corresponds with its masculine aspect as Gemini, its feminine aspect as Virgo, or its balanced state as the planet Mercury.

The qualities of the chakras as they are experienced by the yogi align with the qualities of the planets. The correspondences vary among different yogic traditions, but in this system the qualities of the chakras are assigned the same tendencies and qualities as the planets in Western astrology. The reason that it is so easy to overlay these two systems without contradiction speaks to their common origin — they are branches of the same root.

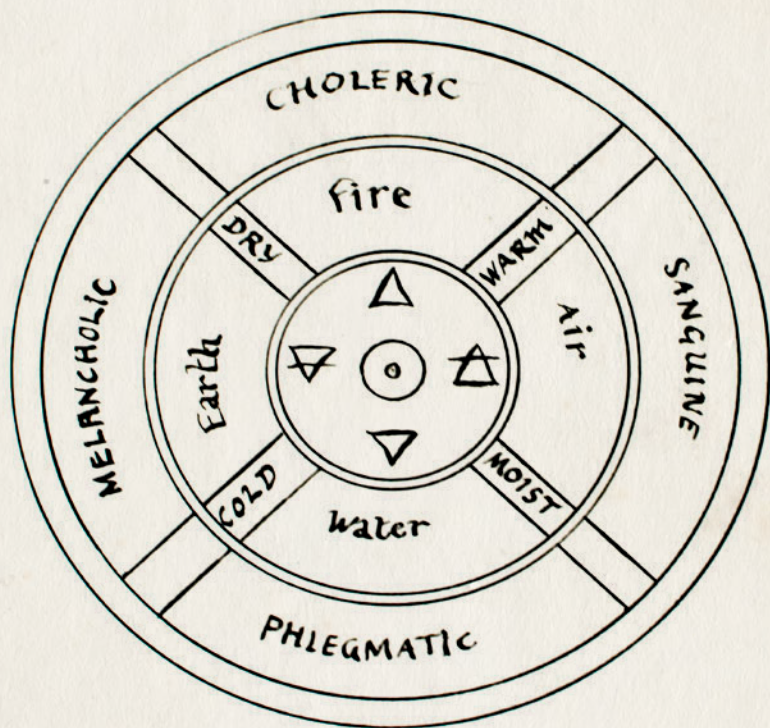


Figure 8: Galen's chart of the humours.

| Swords (Fire) | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>King of Swords</i> | Fire of fire | Very fiery, totally choleric |
| <i>Knight of Swords</i> | Air of fire | Warm, sanguine–choleric |
| <i>Queen of Swords</i> | Water of fire | Balanced, phlegmatic–choleric |
| <i>Page of Swords</i> | Earth of fire | Dry, melancholic–choleric |
| Batons (Air) | | |
| <i>King of Batons</i> | Fire of air | Warm, choleric–sanguine |
| <i>Knight of Batons</i> | Air of air | Very airy, totally sanguine |
| <i>Queen of Batons</i> | Water of air | Moist, phlegmatic–sanguine |
| <i>Page of Batons</i> | Earth of air | Balanced, melancholic–sanguine |
| Cups (Water) | | |
| <i>King of Cups</i> | Fire of water | Balanced, choleric–phlegmatic |
| <i>Knight of Cups</i> | Air of water | Moist, sanguine–phlegmatic |
| <i>Queen of Cups</i> | Water of water | Very watery, totally phlegmatic |
| <i>Page of Cups</i> | Earth of water | Cold, melancholic–phlegmatic |
| Coins (Earth) | | |
| <i>King of Coins</i> | Fire of earth | Dry, choleric–melancholic |
| <i>Knight of Coins</i> | Air of earth | Balanced, sanguine–melancholic |
| <i>Queen of Coins</i> | Water of earth | Cold, phlegmatic–melancholic |
| <i>Page of Coins</i> | Earth of earth | Very earthy, totally melancholic |

THE GREATER SECRETS OF THE SOUL'S JOURNEY

As the trumps are the distinctive element that make up tarot and set it apart from simple playing cards, it is important to know the meaning of these images.

An important aspect of these images is their numbering. Early decks had no numbers but at some point it became important to know their sequential order and card makers used Roman numerals to denote this. Numbering for the trumps varied surprisingly little through the ages and the various places it was made. As I understand it, this is because there is something about this order that was important; something that reveals the tarot's deeper meaning.

When read in the correct order, the trumps tell a story — a story of the journey of the soul.

The numbering of the trumps I have used for this deck is based upon an early known historical order found in the *Tarocco Bolognese*, a tarot pattern found in Bologna, Italy.

The names of these cards were originally in Italian, so in order to express the original archetypal meaning in English, some names have been adapted. For example, the 'Juggler' is the original title for what today is called *The Magician*; while 'Fortitude' is the original name for the *Strength* card in modern decks.

No explanation is known to have accompanied the original tarot. There are no interpretations of the cards' meaning that have come down to us. This is the reason that there is so much

diversity in the explanations offered today by tarot scholars and users.

Therefore all interpretations are my informed guesses based upon historical research, intuition, convention or invention. Using research, many of the meanings become self-evident. I chose keywords that convey the meaning that was intended by the designers of the early tarot. When in doubt I have taken recourse to my own intuition and common sense. This is not to say that my interpretations are authoritative in any way, or exclude other ways of reading the cards. They are simply a reflection of my own prejudices and opinions and should be seen as a guide, a place from where to start your own exploration.

When we number the trumps, four distinct phases become apparent in the ordering of the cards. They all represent distinct stages of the journey of the soul.





Figure 10: The wheel of fortune as it was understood in the Renaissance showing birth, death and the cycle of life. In the centre stands the goddess Fortuna, blindly turning the wheel of fate. Notice the allegory of the angel and the grave found at the bottom of the wheel, familiar from the Judgement card denoting birth and death, but also suggesting the circular nature of the journey of the soul.

THE CODES OF THE TAROT

THE CELESTIAL HARMONY

During the period when the tarot was first being developed and printed, the Italian literati of the time were studying and translating texts from the Romans, Greeks, Hebrews and other sources from the distant past. Some of these ideas had already found their way into Christian thought through the works of Thomas Aquinas and others. Not surprisingly, many of these ideas were also found referenced in the tarot. However, there were some fundamental differences of view upon some major theological points that could not be reconciled with Christianity. For example, God was singular in Christianity, while the ancients had multiple deities and whose mythology was inextricably entwined with that of the planets. Another important distinction was the views of the afterlife — the Church denied the concept of reincarnation which the Greeks embraced. There was no coming back. Many of these ideas were deemed heretical, and anyone who repeated them publicly was condemned (often to death).

According to Greek tradition, the universe was ordered as a series of spheres beginning with the realm of the Gods as the outermost and ending with the earthly plane. It is known as the Ptolemaic order (see above) but was derived from more ancient sources traceable as far back as the Sumerian civilisation, around

THE VICES AND VIRTUES

The trumps are better understood as a series of illustrations for myths. The genius of the tarot is, when taken as a whole, these myths tell another story. They describe a theology, a story of the journey of the soul. If the trumps are a journey, what part do the virtues have to play?

One aspect of the Neoplatonic tradition was to mitigate the influences of the planets through meditation and prayer to gain immortality eventually — the perfection of the soul. The way to do this was to name the generative and limiting aspects of each planet and use the one to conquer the other. During the Renaissance period, these aspects were known as the ‘vices and virtues’ and had percolated into Christianity via Greek thought. If the trumps were a ladder to God, then the virtues would be a necessary part of this journey.

The order of this assignment of the vices and virtues had been more or less standardised by theologians of the Renaissance, and they varied somewhat from the Greek. An interesting example of the vices and virtues can be found in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, which contains a series of frescoes by Giotto called *The Cycle of the Virtues* (1303–05). Surprisingly, this chapel can tell us a lot about the tarot.

Here the vices and virtues are said to symbolise humanity’s progress toward bliss or heavenly happiness. With the aid of the virtues, humanity can overcome the obstacles (vices) in its path. This came from a doctrine inspired by the *Summa Theologica* by Saint Augustine (400 CE), who was known for his interest in Neoplatonism.

As one walks down the aisle of the chapel, the vices and virtues are painted on the panel walls; virtues on the left and vices on the right. At the end of the aisle is *The Last Judgement*.

The vices found here are not the traditional seven deadly sins of pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. Here we have a different set in a slightly different order. In Christian iconography, the virtues were portrayed in two groups: the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance; and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Here, in the chapel they are also organised in a slightly different order, an order that has its origin with Plato.

| The Seven Vices | | The Seven Virtues | |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------------|------------|
| <i>Stultitia</i> | Foolishness | <i>Prudencia</i> | Prudence |
| <i>Inconstantia</i> | Inconsistency | <i>Fortitudo</i> | Fortitude |
| <i>Ira</i> | Wrath | <i>Temperantia</i> | Temperance |
| <i>Iniustitia</i> | Injustice | <i>Justicia</i> | Justice |
| <i>Infidelitas</i> | Infidelity | <i>Fides</i> | Faith |
| <i>Invidia</i> | Envy | <i>Karitas</i> | Charity |
| <i>Desperatio</i> | Despair | <i>Spes</i> | Hope |
| The Last Judgement | | | |
| Hell | | Heaven | |



VII. THE CHARIOT



*Embrace challenges as opportunities for growth
and remain steadfast in your commitment to success.
Unite all aspects of your being under reason's guidance
to overcome obstacles and reach your destination.*

THE MYSTERY

The Chariot of Triumph symbolises a moment of glory and celebration. It follows the traditional iconography of historic decks, representing the chariots used in triumphal parades of ancient Greece and Rome. In this image, Nike, the goddess of victory, drives the chariot. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the *mystai* followed chariots bearing votive statues in a procession from Athens to Eleusis, symbolising the promise of the triumph to come.

The imagery represents Plato's three aspects of the soul — the charioteer is 'reason', and the two horses signify 'emotions' and 'appetite', the desire for physical pleasures. Victory comes when these horses are tamed and driven by the higher mind. Thus, the card represents the focused will, self-discipline and importance of the higher goal.

THE MESSAGE

When *VII The Chariot* appears, it suggests you need strength, courage and determination to overcome the obstacles within your own. Without the challenges of life, the soul cannot fashion the rough rock of the soul into a shining gem.

Tame your wild, instinctive nature. This could look like choosing a healthy meal over junk food, or choosing to remain committed to a challenging goal instead of straying from it for something easier. Your unwavering commitment will lead to victory in these situations, so draw on your inner strength and resources. What do you need to help you move toward the outcomes you seek? Look to your prior experiences for evidence of your capabilities. Remain focused and determined. Direct your energy and attention



XVII. THE STAR



Return to the path of awakening to your true, immortal self. Hope is the remembrance of your divine nature. It is the rebirth of who you truly are.

THE MYSTERY

The meaning of this card is rebirth, renewal and the cycle of immortal and mortal life. This card shows Hope — or Spes, as the Romans knew her. She helps us remember who we *really* are—our immortal soul—and the possibility of perfection. Therefore she stands for hope, new life and immortality. While she signified new life, fruitful gardens and fields of plenty, her original role was that of an Underworld goddess. Presiding over the waters of ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’, she accompanied the soul on the symbolic journey through the afterlife before it was reincarnated on Earth. This image depicts her pouring the libations of the sacred waters—the rain of the heavens—in offering to the earth and the sky, bringing fertility to the land. (See the section ‘The Star’ in *Part One*.)

THE MESSAGE

Wake up! The Star of Hope calls you to remember who you truly are — the Divine in disguise. Deep within the core of your heart lies a hidden secret, a seed of eternity waiting to sprout. Hope melts the snow of your despair so you can climb towards wholeness. Take the fruit of the gods, drink the waters of ‘remembering’ and claim your inheritance that is buried like a secret treasure.

Realising your true nature is not something to be studied from books — you must learn from experience. This was the intention behind the mysteries of Persephone. While you’ve forgotten your previous incarnations, it doesn’t mean you can’t work towards remembrance. After all the challenges you’ve been through, this is the moment where you can drink the waters of Mnemosyne