

16 New Kingdom Egyptian Tarot Emerges

When I began to study the Tarot, I asked two questions:

Where did it come from?

Who designed it?

At the time the books I read only had vague guesses, some of which I have mentioned. I began with Qabalah, and this was fruitful. Qabalah was more like a bridge than a source. It opened up vistas into ancient Egypt. When I turned to Egypt, it was clear that archaeologists had not turned up any decks of cards in the tombs. They pretty well had tossed out the theory of Egypt as a source for the Tarot despite numerous lingering traditions. However, from the work of Professor Peter Piccione I discovered that the ancient Egyptian board game called Senet had a nice precise structure. Furthermore there was ample evidence that it was used not only as an amusing game, but also in a ritual manner as an oracle. Many ancient oracle systems grew out of games that mimic real life. Would the Egyptians use the same Senet Game Text layout for their oracle or have other designs?

So I began using my knowledge of the Tarot Trumps to study the Senet Board Game Text and fragmented images collected by Professor Piccione. It was very promising. I have described my great insight while studying the Ani papyrus when I noticed that the thrones of the gods resembled Senet Game Board squares. I knew I had found in that tableau one of the major designs for a Senet Oracle Board.

The Senet Game Board has been a part of ancient Egypt from the 1st dynasty or earlier. We have scenes of people playing the game in Old Kingdom tombs, and we know from funerary art that by the New Kingdom Egyptians were using the game as an oracle. So the New Kingdom, which begins with the 18th dynasty, and is the last great golden era of ancient Egypt, is where we start to have a wealth of material to work with, because New Kingdom pharaohs were buried near Thebes in the Valley of Kings, and had their tombs hollowed out of the mountain cliffs. The walls were then smoothed and decorated with colorful pictures and texts. Also papyrus scrolls such as that of Ani were recovered in Thebes and worked on by experts.

One pharaoh particularly attracted my attention. He was Tutmose III, the 6th pharaoh of the 18th dynasty, who was just a child when he became pharaoh, so his stepmother and aunt, a lady named Hatshepsut took over and ruled as a very capable regent while still acknowledging the kingship of Tutmose and training the young boy to become a full-fledged pharaoh. Tutmose showed talent, so when he matured, Hatshepsut put him in charge of the Egyptian armies. He proved to be a successful leader and expanded the territory and influence of Egypt. Eventually Hatshepsut made him full co-ruler and then finally let him take over the reins of government.



Hatshepsut



Tutmose III

Tutmose was not only an able military man, he also was interested in literature and education. He hired as his Grand Vizier an educated man named Weser Amen. Together these two men, together with a team of other scholars and artists, decorated the walls of Tutmose's tomb with two very important texts. One was the first complete copy of the **Amduat**, an illustrated book about the 12 Hours when Ra, the Sun God, is gone from the sky. This work turns out to be a detailed symbolic analysis and description of various states of the subconscious mind or soul during sleep, meditation, or even death. The **Amduat** was probably composed during the early years of the 18th dynasty.

Another major work that suddenly appeared in the tomb of Tutmose III is known as the **Litany of Ra** and is a listing of 75 "deities", each with a simple illustration plus a label plus a brief description to help identify the figure. Simple drawings of the "deities" were painted on the columns of the burial chamber. They look like rows of narrow rectangular "cards", each with its own name label. Of great interest is a "Handbook" that goes with these "deities" on the columns. The handbook makes it clear

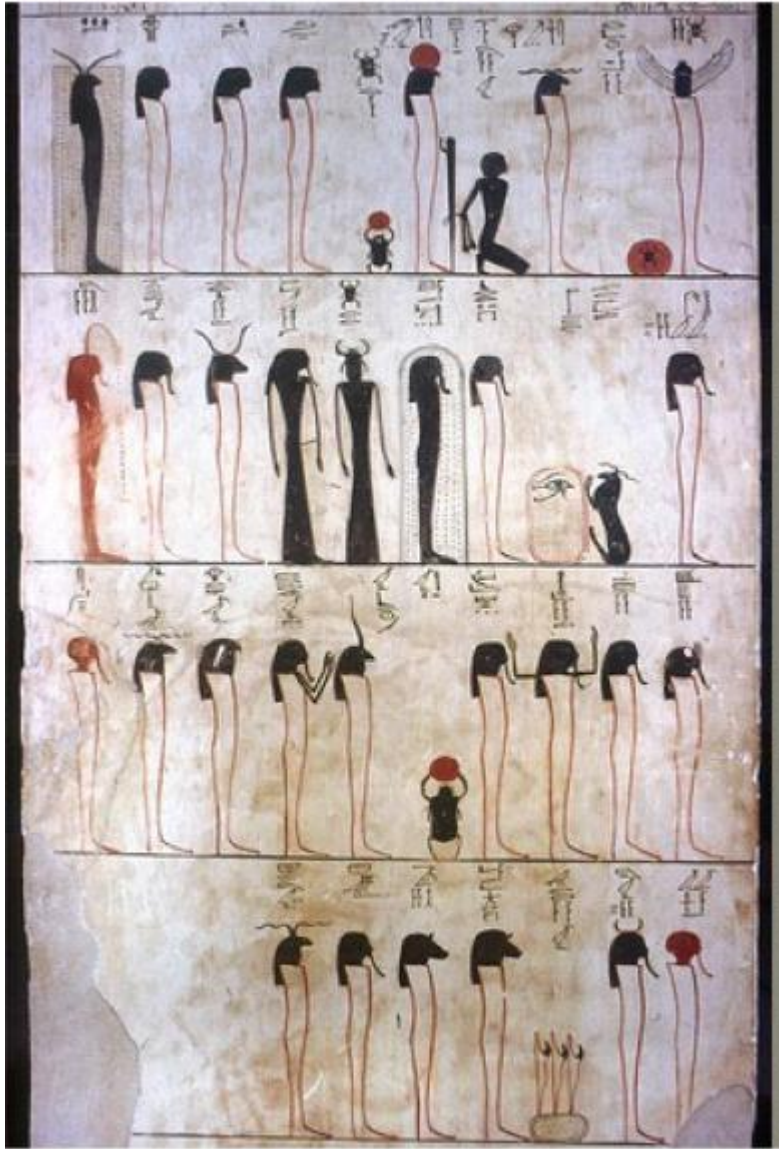
that all of these “deities” are really transformations of Ra. The book also includes general instructions for how to study and apply these transformations.

This material seems to have been part of a curriculum designed by the royal family under the direction of Tutmose III to train future pharaohs and other high officials. My suspicion that Weser Amen was the author or co-author of the **Litany of Ra** comes from the fact that he is the only non-pharaoh to have this text in his tomb. This was a special honor and strongly suggests his role in the creation of the text.

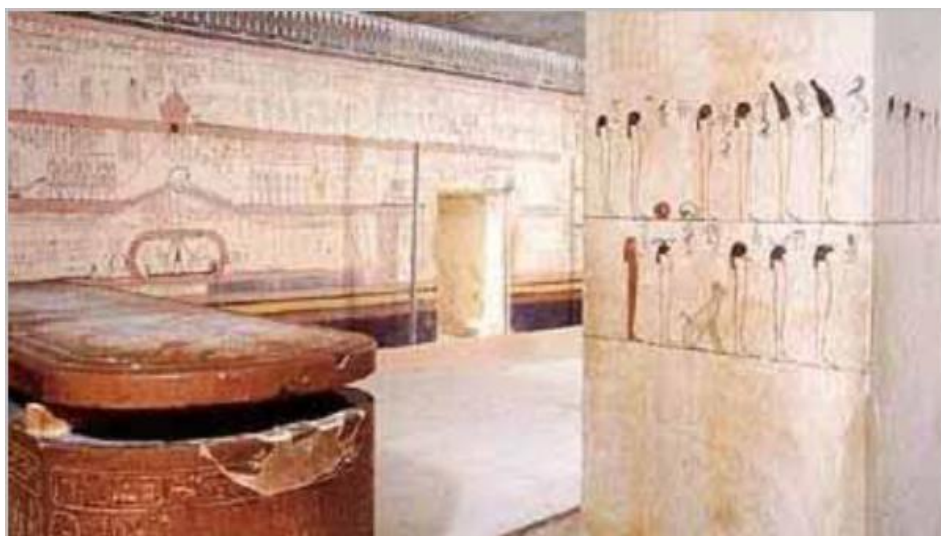
Here on the walls of a New Kingdom tomb was an almost complete Tarot deck, with “cards” having identifying labels and a handbook.



Photograph of the mummy of Tutmose III, the pharaoh who authorized the creation of the first primitive (almost complete) Tarot deck. We do not have photos of Weser Amen, but his tomb also contains the **Litany**, a singular honor bestowed by Pharaoh Tutmose III.



Photograph of a section of column in KV 34 (tomb of Tutmosé III) showing about half of the deck.



Photograph of the burial chamber of Tutmosé III. Some of the rest of his Tarot deck is visible on the column next to his stone sarcophagus.

On the wall in the background is a long wall painting of the complete **Amduat** with a “cast of thousands” and wonderful illustrations. The book is a long Cosmic Comic Book covering what happens during the “12 Hours” when the sun is not visible. This is the first systematic attempt to describe the layers of consciousness that lie below the ordinary wakeful conscious mind. It covers dream states, deep sleep, and far beyond.





Another photo of the burial chamber columns with the Litany of Ra. The text that accompanies the “cards” is also visible on the columns.



Granite statue of Weser Amen (Useramen), Vizier of Tutmose III and his wife Tuiu, found in a cachette at Karnak, now in Cairo Museum CG 42118 (JE 37390). Photo by Georges Legrain (1865-1917) [Wikipedia] Weser Amen has two tombs in Thebes: TT61 and TT131.

Tutmose III was a very popular pharaoh, and for centuries after his passing people made little clay scarabs with his cartouche name etched on their bellies: Men Kheper Ra. Some of these also have images of “cards” from his deck etched on them and may have been used as talismans or even for divination.

Full titles of Tutmose III

Men-kheper-Rā I Tēhuti-mes III (Μισάφρις, Μήφρης) 


The first cartouche is Men Kheper Ra. The second cartouche is Jehuty Mes (Tutmose).

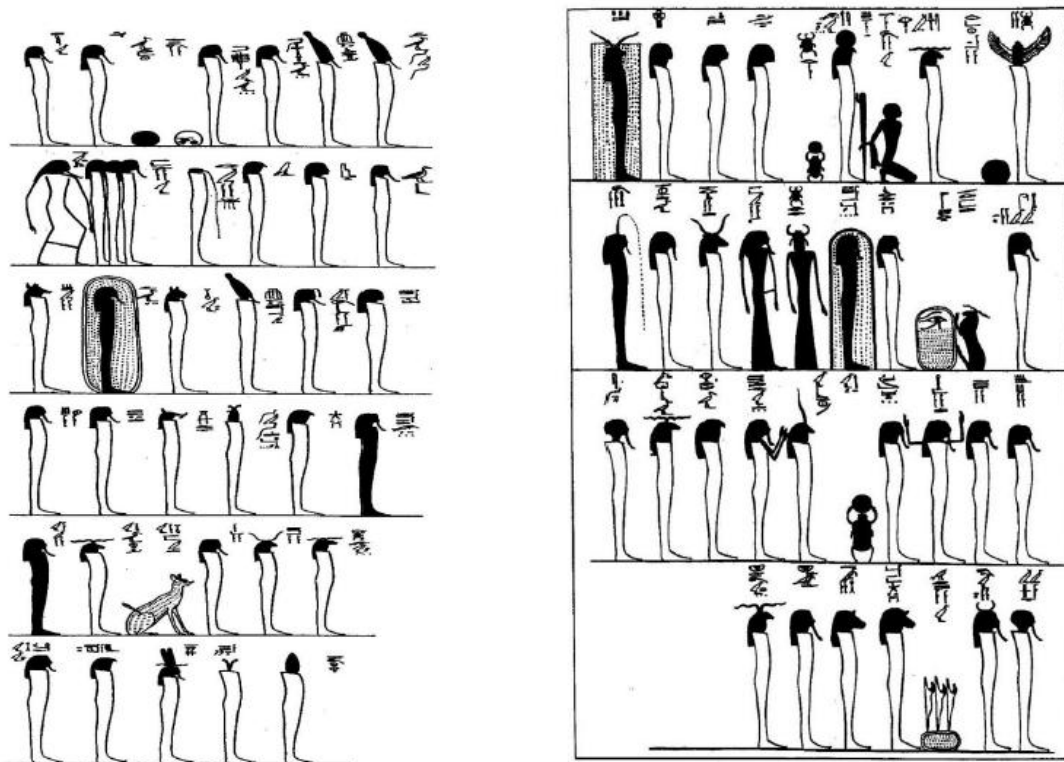
Suddenly I began to have “answers” to my questions. The first primitive Tarot deck appeared in Egypt during the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom. It was developed by Tutmose III (His Majesty Men Kheper Ra) and his Grand Vizier, Weser Amen (The Hidden Wizard, The Wizard of the Invisible Senet Board). Both these men had the Senet board glyph in their names. Together their names include “Amen” and “Ra”. Ra was the official publisher of the deck. Amen was the scribe who penned the work behind the scenes.

This first deck includes the “Trumps” (major deities), “Court Cards” (secondary deities) and the so-called “minors” (what I call Process Cards). The process cards indicate certain powers and processes handled by the Trumps. The Egyptians did not clearly divide the process cards into “suits”. This is something I did. There are also some strange anomalies that suggest the work in the tomb of Tutmose perhaps was only a first draft. A couple of card images double up for two deities on the list (perhaps for reasons of space on the columns). Some images are very specific and detailed, even with subtle humor. Other images are just repeated numerous times, so we must depend on the labels to distinguish them. One card has two images, as if the artist could not make up his mind which to choose. Some Trump images do not even properly match the standard images of the deities in the established traditional art format. The order of the cards is also of great interest and has some weird aspects. All of these “anomalies” were quite rigorously preserved by the conservative scribes in all future editions of the “deck”.

There are only 75 instead of 78 cards. One obvious missing card is that of the Sun. The two other missing cards are also of great interest. We will see how this lack was beautifully remedied during the next dynasty by the great pharaoh Sety I.



The above photos show three versions of the cartouche of Tutmose III. The one on the left is on the bottom of a clay scarab representing the Baboon Fool Trump. This may well be an ancient Tarot card. The middle one is from the pharaoh list at Abydos. The one on the right is from my latest Senet Tarot deck card back design.



The above drawings of the Ra Tarot cards painted on the two columns in the burial chamber of Tutmose III were made under the direction of Professor Erik Hornung, who is a world expert on New Kingdom funerary texts. He meticulously transcribed from the tombs all surviving New Kingdom copies of the **Litany of Ra** and its handbook. This was the basis for my translation of the **Litany**. Anyone seriously interested in the Tarot and its truly intended uses should study this “primitive” deck and its accompanying handbook. The handbook is mostly written in fairly simple Egyptian, often in the form of a poetic litany.

Since I know the handbook was intended as a textbook, I have made it into a textbook for learning ancient Egyptian as well as an introduction to the ancient Shedy Training Program of the Pharaohs. Readers can just read through the translation, or they can work through the text line by line, reading it in the original hieroglyphics. I provide an index of all the vocabulary in the work.



Photograph of the Senet Game Text preserved on the wall of a Theban Tomb. As you can see the wall has been damaged by “archaeologists”, and is in a deteriorating condition. Fortunately the text was transcribed by Professor Piccione. I have made a rough restoration (see below) so that it is possible to read the text. To the right is the deceased sitting by a Senet Oracle Board and consulting the oracle. You can see the pawns placed on the table.



16 Study Questions

- * Why did games sometimes develop into oracle systems?
- * How did Dr. White reconstruct the layout of the Senet Game Board?
- * Why was the Senet Game Board the first solid evidence of using Tarot-like archetypes in a game?
- * Why was the New Kingdom an excellent period for finding material about the use of Senet Boards for divination?
- * What pharaoh in what dynasty was responsible for authorizing the creation of the first Tarot deck?
- * Who was the pharaoh's chief assistant in that project?
- * What was the name of the book that first listed a set of 75 "cards" that could qualify as a prototype Tarot "deck"?
- * How many cards were in that first deck?
- * Can you mention some anomalies that appear in this deck?
- * In addition to drawing and labeling each card, the book also included what important supplementary material?
- * What other major sacred text was included in the tomb of the Pharaoh who first authorized the deck? Why is that book important?
- * What three categories of "cards" already appear in the New Kingdom list?
- * How were the suits of the non-Trump cards designated?