

02 Introduction to the Tarot

In this article we will begin to introduce a game that has had a great influence on the course of human civilization. This influence has been rather neglected by scholars because they consider such a game to be no more than a popular amusement and seldom consider the deeper aspects of its influence on the course of human civilization. So I will tell you a little about how I stumbled upon this game and began to investigate its origins and influence on human society.

The game we will explore is a card game known as Tarot. In many parts of Europe it is called by names that generally sound like Tarok. It also has other names that we will introduce later. The game has been around for many centuries. When I first encountered the game, I was fascinated by the many artistic variations the cards had, and I became curious to find out where it originated and how it developed and came to have such a widespread popularity.

First let me explain how I learned about the Tarot, because, at the time I was following a very scholarly pathway, and scholars usually are not interested in card games and see them as merely a social activity mainly for amusement. Card games were something I played with my siblings as a child (Rummy, Go Fish, Old Maid, Authors, Poker, and so on). By the time I reached college I had forgotten about card games and had no interest in joining my bridge-playing classmates.

I spent my time with books, and loved to browse in book stores to find new information and viewpoints. So if I found a new book store or a second-hand book stall, I was drawn to it like a moth to a street lamp.

One time as I walked on a street in our village I noticed a new book store had just opened. On the door of the store was printed "Oracle Tarot Shoppe". Although the spelling was archaic, the atmosphere of the place seemed rather New Age, and the owner was selling incense and other things of interest to spiritually oriented people. There were quite a few books for sale, but along one wall were dozens of different decks of cards all with the word Tarot on them. As I looked closer I found that most of the books were also on the subject of Tarot.

So I asked the proprietor what this Tarot was, and he began to explain how it is a card game that can also be used as an oracle for divination. I had never seen such cards before, and I asked him how a person might begin to learn about the deck and how to use it. Then I asked him, "If I wanted to buy a first deck and a book about it, what should I do?"

He took a deck off the shelf and showed it to me. This deck was quite unusual and unlike the other decks he had for sale. The cards were much larger than the ordinary Tarot decks, and I already had noticed that Tarot decks generally were larger than ordinary playing cards. The second thing I noticed was that there were not as many cards in this deck as in the other decks. The third thing I noticed was that the cards were all printed in black and white on a plain non-glossy stiff paper, whereas the other decks were all brightly colored and glossy.

When I asked him why they were like this, he replied that I must take them home and color them myself. That would guide my attention to noticing the details. He showed me how the book that came with the cards recommended the colors to be used for each card. I thought this was quite amusing, rather like coloring books that we had as children and colored in with crayons. So I bought the deck and the book to go with it and took them home to start exploring.

I soon discovered why there were only 22 cards plus a cover card in this deck. A normal Tarot deck has 78 cards divided into three groups. There are 22 cards that are known as Trumps, then there are 16 Court cards, plus 40 pip cards. The pip cards are like the number cards in a poker deck, except that the symbols used on Tarot decks are different from those used on poker decks -- though they have roughly equivalent values. The word "pips" means small symbolic items such as seeds or pebbles that can be used to represent numbers for groups of things. Children are usually taught numbers by showing them drawings of groups of things. This is the same mnemonic idea. The numbers go from 1 to 10 in four groups. Each group has a special "suit" that is printed in the form of a special symbol that is repeated on a card as many times as needed to represent the number of the card. The Court Cards are the same as the Court Cards in a poker deck, except that there are four knights added to the kings, queens and "jacks". The Court Card figures are based on the royalty of Medieval feudal society. The knight swore fealty to a local king. The "jack" was a page who served

the knight. So a poker deck just has 52 cards (plus two jokers as potential wild cards).

I was already familiar with poker decks and knew about knights from reading the stories about King Arthur and his Round Table team of knights. So my first task was to learn about the Trump cards.

The 22 Trump cards are also called Major Arcana or Majors. The deck I bought just had those Trump cards plus an extra card that had a diagram on it that I recognized as the “Tree of Life”. I wondered what that had to do with a Tarot deck, and we will discuss that question later.

An *arcanum* is something secret or mysterious, and the term is used because most people are not clear what the real significance of a Trump card is. In many games the Trump (trump comes from “triumph”) cards are more powerful than the Court and Pip cards, so that they can help a person win in a card game.

The Trump cards are drawn in greater detail than the other cards, and each one is different. My deck had labels and numbers on each card, and I soon found that this is a common practice, and that the labels are usually pretty standardized, although some deck designers change the labels or even leave them off the cards.

As I studied the cards and colored them in, I decided not always to follow the color code suggested in the book, but tried out my own versions until I found a pleasing color combination. So I made copies of the images, colored them to my taste, and then laminated them so that they would last a long time and not be damaged by dirt or moisture. After many years I still have that original set of Trumps that I colored, and they remain in excellent condition. I recommend this method for beginners to learn about the Tarot Trumps. The deck I used is published by Builders of the Adytum (B.O.T.A.) They are available online: <http://store.bota.org/tarotdecks.html>. Get the digital images for download (\$5.00). Print them out, color them, and laminate them for your own use. Or buy the card stock printed versions for \$6 or \$8.

As I read about and studied the Trump cards, I often went back to the Oracle Tarot Shoppe and began collecting decks of all kinds as well as many books on various aspects of the Tarot. The proprietor also did

card readings. Sometimes with his permission and that of his client, I watched as he laid out cards and discussed them with the client. The deck he used is called the **Voyager Tarot**, and is a very colorful deck in which each card was designed as a computer art collage on the theme of the specific card. I soon realized that this is not a beginner's deck, although it is very attractive. The cards are a little larger than ordinary Tarot cards.

I gradually became more familiar with the cards and began to get a feel for how the shop owner did his readings. I began to do readings for myself, my family, and friends, strictly for entertainment purposes and as a way to practice and learn. I kept a notebook of the questions, the layout I used, the cards that were drawn during the reading, and my interpretations so that I could see over time how accurate my readings were.

As I practiced reading cards I recalled that, when I was just starting 7th grade I had visited my German grandmother. She was living alone, since her husband had passed away from his heart ailment. She often played solitaire with a poker deck, but during that visit I watched her lay out the 52 cards in four rows of 13 each and then proceed to interpret the cards in some way. I did not understand what she said or how she did it, but it was as if she could see a story in the cards that related to some aspect of her life. She was not just an ordinary housewife, but had been a professional musician, a published poet, and was something of a mystic -- all of which was beyond me at that age, except that I knew my mother had become a professional musician inspired by her mother and also had some special psychic abilities. After playing with the Tarot for a while I began to understand what my grandmother had been doing with her ordinary poker cards.

As I read more about the Tarot, I became aware of its history. It seems the decks began to appear in Europe during the Middle Ages. One thing that I discovered was that when the Tarot began to appear, it was already a thoroughly developed system. The Trump cards each had particular features and labels, and over time these changed very little. In our modern era there is great diversity in Tarot decks, but the same basic set of Trumps remains for the most part unchanged and is only influenced by the particular flavor the designer wants to impart to his or her deck.

One thing that struck me was that none of the material about the history of Tarot could precisely determine where the original design for the deck originated, and this stimulated my curiosity. Who invented the deck, and when, and why? It appeared too suddenly in too complete a form to have evolved as a popular pastime.

Some people said that the Tarot was developed by the Gypsies and brought by them into Europe. During the Middle Ages bands of Gypsies roamed about Europe entertaining people with music, special performances, and fortune telling with Tarot cards.

Another theory was that the Tarot was developed by the Jewish people as a part of their Qabalah tradition. Jews migrated from the Middle East into various parts of the Roman Empire after they rebelled against the Roman occupation of Palestine, and the Roman troops destroyed their temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish settlements and communities maintained their Hebrew language and teachings, and after the Roman dispersion developed a mystical oral tradition that they called Qabalah (The Oral Tradition). This was originally oral teachings passed down from local rabbis (Jewish religious leaders), but gradually also became a literary tradition and even influenced the Christian mystics so that there arose a form of Christian Qabalah.

A third theory was that the Tarot came from ancient Egypt. This may have been partly related to the Gypsy theory, because Europeans thought that the Gypsies came from Egypt. It turns out they really migrated Westward into Europe from India and were not from Egypt. However, the idea that the Tarot possibly came from ancient Egypt and the Gypsies were just using it as a fortune telling tool and thereby helping to popularize it in Europe still remain viable.

At the time I had done no prior detailed study of Egypt, but I had some background in Hebrew, because my mother was a music director at a Jewish Temple for many years and often asked me to help out with the choir during the High Holy Days. We were not Jewish, but from this exposure she already knew a lot of Hebrew, and I picked up quite a bit as well, since I had to read the words in Hebrew that they used in the temple and sang in the choir.

Looking at the 15th century during which the Tarot appeared in Europe, I found that this coincided with the early development of paper and printing technology. For playing cards you needed to have paper, and to make the cards widely available you needed to be able to print off many copies of the cards.

It turns out that in those days most of the common people were illiterate (and deliberately kept that way), so the earliest printing was of images, many being themes taken from the Bible. On the other hand, playing cards did not require literacy and quickly became a popular addition to traditional gambling games. So the Church had mixed feelings about the advent of printing. On the one hand it was a tool for spreading imagery about the sacred teachings of the Bible, but on the other hand it promoted gambling that distracted people from attending Church services, so often the Church tried to ban the sale of Tarot cards. Still, the priests could print indulgences so sinners could repent their gambling by making contributions to the Church and receive an indulgence from the Pope. Once literacy began to increase, printing rapidly moved into the spreading of information. This put Bibles into the hands of the people as well as a lot of material that drew people in other directions.

Paper making and printing originated in China during the Han dynasty, but it took quite a few centuries before the technology finally reached Europe. The advent of this technology in Europe and its rapid spread in society there found a great impetus from the popularity of simple mass-produced card games that soon circulated throughout Europe. Although wealthy elite families could hire artists to hand paint their own Tarot decks, it was the printed cards that changed society. The technology rapidly developed from simple black and white woodblock prints, to hand-colored block prints, and soon to multi-color printing.

The rest is history, leading to libraries, literature, literacy, and the rapid growth of education. The simple decks of paper cards spurred a revolution that has sped the development of science and technology throughout the planet and changed our world in many ways, not to speak of the thousands of different Tarot decks and other card games that have arisen so that there even is a huge Encyclopedia of Tarot.

So now we want to look at what is the educational secret in this game, who developed it, and for what broad purpose that to many people remains completely unsuspected.

02 Study Questions

- * Why is the game of Tarot generally ignored by the scholarly world?
- * How did Dr. White first become acquainted with the Tarot?
- * Are you acquainted with the Tarot? If so, how did that happen?
- * What are the three major components of a standard Tarot deck?
- * If I want to buy a first Tarot deck and a book about it, what should I do?
- * Why is it useful to color your own deck of Trump cards?
- * What do the traditional European Tarot Court Cards represent?
- * What are the pip cards?
- * What are the Major Arcana or Trumps?
- * What are three theories about the ancient origins of the Tarot?
- * What technologies evolved in Europe at the time the Tarot appeared?
- * What was the role of the Medieval Church in the development of those technologies?
- * Where did those technologies come from?
- * Why did the Tarot get involved with those technologies?
- * What is the ultimate outcome of that technological development?

* For further discussion: Where is that technological development now headed? What major changes have occurred in the last century to shift the course of that technology?

Suggested Readings:

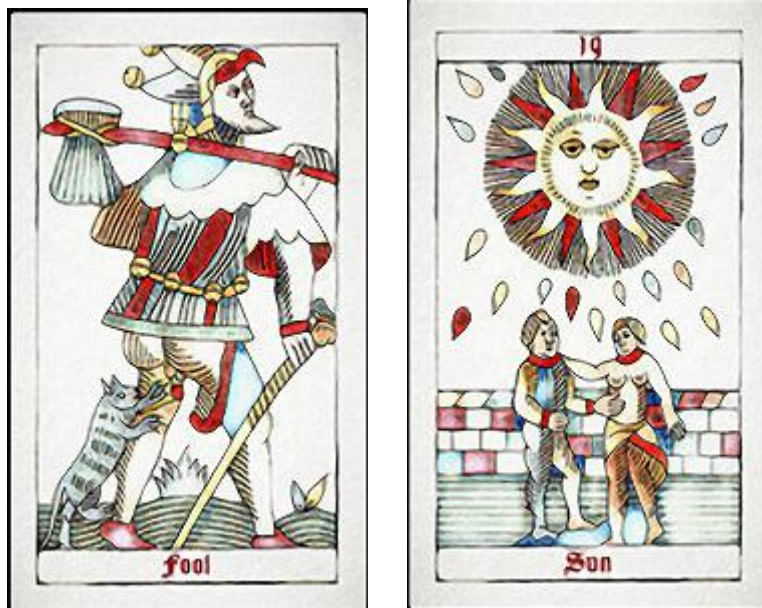
Mystical Origins of the Tarot: From Ancient Roots to Modern Usage

By Paul Huson Available online to read as a Google book.

Douglass A. White. **The Senet Tarot of Ancient Egypt, Part I: A History from Pre-Dynastic Times to the Roman Era.** Available from <http://www.bentylightgarden.com/StoreMenuE.htm> to read or as a free download.



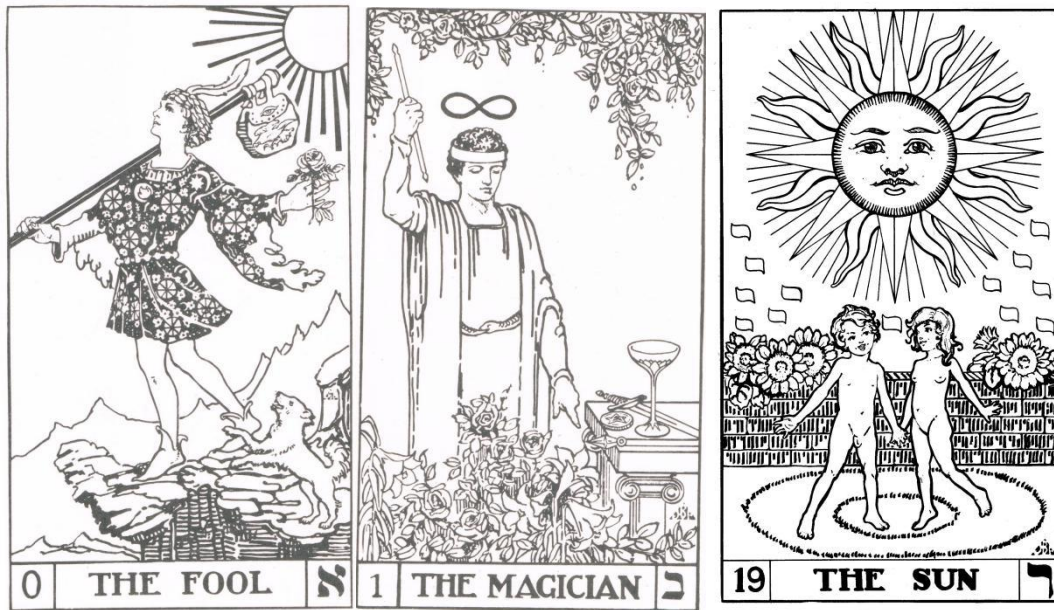
15th Century Italian woodblock printed sheet of Tarot Trumps and Court Cards
Image from Huson's book (see **Suggested Readings** above).



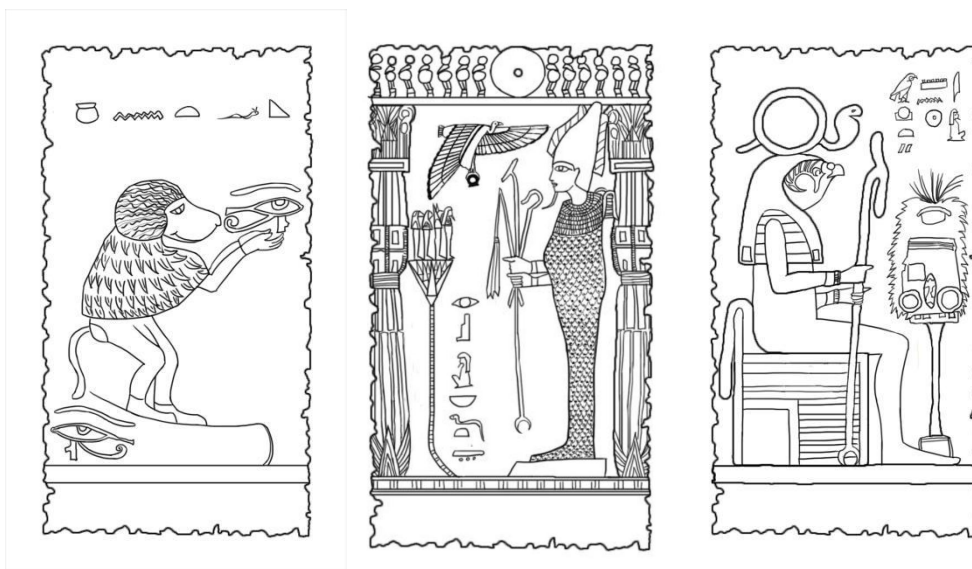
Tarot of Marseilles, What hand colored blockprints might have looked like.



15th century handpainted Visconte Sforza Trumps



Examples of the BOTA Tarot Trump Images.



Examples of Senet Tarot Trump Images.

A set of 30 digital outline card images including
 22 Trumps, 8 Court Cards, and 2 Transcendental Cards
 Available from bentylightgarden.com/StoreMenuE
 Only \$6.00.