

# Out of Africa: Tarot's Fascination With Egypt

**Helen S. Farley**

## **Introduction**

Mention 'tarot' and images of an exotic and mysterious gypsy fortune-teller spring unbidden to consciousness. Dark eyes flashing, she reveals the trumps one at a time, each a strange portent, preternaturally speaking of life, love, loss, and death. The gypsies, themselves enigmatic and of uncertain origin, were allegedly charged with carrying the tarot deck from a doomed Egyptian priesthood with the forethought to encode their most esoteric secrets in a game, a seemingly harmless pastime. How often have we heard that tarot's difficult birth occurred in an Egypt ancient and mystical? And though tarot scholars have known about the real origins of the deck in the Renaissance court of a northern Italian city for some two hundred years, still that link with Egypt remains obdurate. This beguiling myth, never convincingly verified by its perpetrators, began in the desire for pseudo-legitimacy through an ancient – though false – lineage and the dogged persistence of a pre-Rosetta infatuation with all things Egyptian. This article explores the origins of this persistent belief.

## **Egyptomania in France**

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, all of France was enraptured with the exploits of their new leader, Napoleon Bonaparte. He had secured victory for France across Western Europe and had consolidated French power in Egypt. In the true spirit of the Enlightenment, Napoleon had taken a bevy of scientists and archaeologists with him to this ancient land and they ensured a steady stream of Egyptian artefacts and information about the distant locale travelled back to France.<sup>1</sup> Occultists were quick to incorporate Egyptian lore into their schemes. There was a common belief that the land of the Nile was the

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<sup>1</sup> John David Wortham, *British Egyptology: 1549-1906* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), p. 49.

stronghold of Hermetic wisdom.<sup>2</sup> The French fascination with all things Nilotic fuelled their obsession with hieroglyphics, at that time still untranslated. Investigators laboured under the belief that these intriguing inscriptions concealed ancient magical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* was a major source of inspiration for these occultists even though the work had long been shown to have little basis in fact.<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Champollion's translation of the Rosetta Stone in 1822<sup>5</sup> enabled the translation of hieroglyphics, but occultists were slow to accept that, for the most part, they did not spell out great wisdom. Even so, occultists still believed that alchemy was born in an Egypt masked in antiquity;<sup>6</sup> their Egyptomania fanned by Abbé Jean Terrason's successful novel, *Sethos*, written in 1731.<sup>7</sup>

This allure also explained the French occultists' fascination with the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It had been written by Greek writers who believed that Egypt was the repository of a pristine philosophy and powerful magic.<sup>8</sup> When these documents were rediscovered and translated during the Renaissance, the aspiring magi of the period took them literally and assumed they were works of an ancient Egyptian provenance.<sup>9</sup> It was not until 1614, when classical scholar Isaac Casaubon was unsettled by the idea that pagans had predicted the coming of Christ, that doubt was cast on the authenticity of the Hermetic texts.<sup>10</sup> The discovery of this deception was widely recognised, especially by the

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<sup>2</sup> James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival: A Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dempsey, 'Renaissance Hieroglyphic Studies and Gentile Bellini's Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria', in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, eds Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Folger Books, 1988), p. 343.

<sup>4</sup> Liselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (St Louis: Washington University Press, 1970), pp. 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalie David, *The Experience of Ancient Egypt* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 228.

<sup>7</sup> Wortham, *British Egyptology*, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> David S. Katz, *The Occult Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present Day*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff, 'The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture', in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches*, eds Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 492-493.

<sup>10</sup> Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen, and William D. Wharton, *The Way of Hermes: The Corpus Hermeticum* (London: Duckworth, 1999) p. 82.

Protestants,<sup>11</sup> but in largely Catholic France the enthusiasm for the texts remained unabated.

Freemasonry, itself enormously popular in Napoleonic France, also incorporated the rampant Egyptomania of the time. C. Friedrich von Köppen (1734-1797) and Johann Wilhelm Bernhard von Hymmen (1725-1786) anonymously published the *Crata Repoa* (1778), which told of a fictitious initiation into the Egyptian mysteries consisting of seven rites enacted in crypts, caves and secret chambers.<sup>12</sup> Freemasons had apparently been the heirs of the geometrical skills of the ancient masters who had inherited their learning from Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>13</sup> In 1784, Count Alessandro di Cagliostro (1743-1795) revealed his Egyptian rite, a Masonic order formulated by the count.<sup>14</sup> Visitors to his 'Temple of Isis' in Paris were greeted by a servant dressed as an Egyptian and ushered into the séance conducted by 'le Grand Cophht' Cagliostro.<sup>15</sup>

It was into this intellectually cluttered milieu that esoteric tarot first made its appearance. The game of tarot was very popular across Europe and was played throughout France in the seventeenth century, but by 1700 the game was completely unknown in Paris, being played only in the eastern parts of the country such as Alsace, Burgundy, Franche-Comté, and Provence.<sup>16</sup> For the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Paris, the Renaissance imagery of the tarot trumps appeared especially exotic.<sup>17</sup> It was almost inevitable that the mysterious card game, its symbolism denied its original relevance once removed from its Renaissance context, should appear to contain promises of forgotten esoteric lore when rediscovered by a people primed to discern such knowledge in every object, sacred or mundane. The first to make this

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<sup>11</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of Occult Tarot* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1996), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Dummett and John McLeod, *A History of Games Played with the Tarot Pack: The Game of Triumphs*, vol. 1 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, p. xi.

connection between archaic wisdom and the tarot was Antoine Court de Gébelin. A French Freemason, protestant clergyman and esotericist, Court de Gébelin first made this connection just prior to the French Revolution.<sup>18</sup> He was well-versed in all of the esoteric currents that permeated French culture at that time including Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, Kabbalism, the works of Emmanuel Swedenborg and esoteric Freemasonry. In addition, Basil Rákóczi claimed that Court de Gébelin was also an initiate of the Martinists and that he had been taught about the *Book of Thoth* – a legendary, lost corpus of magical lore from Egypt – by Louis Claude de Saint-Martin himself.<sup>19</sup>

Between 1773 and 1782, Court de Gébelin published his nine-volume opus entitled *Le Monde Primitif Analysé et Comparé avec le Monde Moderne* of which the eighth volume was in part devoted to the origins of tarot.<sup>20</sup> Here Court de Gébelin reported that some time in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, he had come across some ladies playing the game of tarot. In Paris these cards were unusual, and he had not seen them since he was a boy. He was intrigued by the Hermetic mysteries of ancient Egypt and it occurred to him that he was seeing a sacred Egyptian book,<sup>21</sup> perhaps even the remnants of the *Book of Thoth*. The trump cards he regarded as a disguised assemblage of ancient Egyptian religious doctrines. For example, he identified the Popess as ‘the High Priestess’, the Chariot as ‘Osiris Triumphant’, and the Star as ‘Sirius’ or ‘the Dog Star’.<sup>22</sup> This *Book of Thoth* he supposed, must have been brought to Europe by the gypsies, who had been safeguarding it since it had been entrusted to them by Egyptian priests millennia ago. He deduced that the safest way to preserve their ancient wisdom must have been to encode it as a game and to trust that someday an adept would be able to decipher it. This honour he

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<sup>18</sup> Giordano Berti, ‘Il Libro Di Thot, Ovvero, L’interpretazione Esoterica Del Tarocco’, in *I Tarocchi: Le Carte Di Corte: Bioco E Magia Alla Corte Degli Estensi*, eds Giordano Berti and Andrea Vitali (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1987), p. 186.

<sup>19</sup> Charlene Elizabeth Gates, ‘The Tarot Trumps: Their Origin, Archetypal Imagery, and Use in Some Works of English Literature’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oregon, 1982), p. 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> Thierry Depaulis, *Tarot, Jeu et Magie* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1984), p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Stuart R. Kaplan and Jean Huets, *The Encyclopedia of Tarot*, vol. IV (Stamford: U. S. Games Systems, Inc., 2005), pp. 699, 702.

<sup>22</sup> Christina Olsen, ‘*Carte Da Trionfi: The Development of Tarot in Fifteenth Century Italy*’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 266.

claimed for himself.<sup>23</sup> More recently, Arland Ussher elaborated this strategy eloquently: “[i]f you intend that a thing shall last forever, do not commit it into the hands of Virtue but into those of Vice.”<sup>24</sup>

The nature of the calamity that befell the Egyptians such that they must encode their secrets to ensure their survival was not detailed. Charlene Gates proposed that the Egyptian priests may have been forced to enact such measures when the Persian king Cambyses invaded Egypt down to Nubia after the death of the Pharaoh Ahmose in 525BCE.<sup>25</sup> This timing would seem appropriate as Egypt was experiencing a cultural revival with a surge of patriotic and religious fervour under the Saite dynasty (664-525BCE). Herodotus described the invasion as both ruthless and sacrilegious. If ever there was a time that would necessitate the encryption of Egyptian wisdom in order to hide it from marauding invaders, this would be it.<sup>26</sup> Intimately connected with the hypothesis of an Egyptian provenance for tarot was the idea that the gypsies brought the deck to Europe. For many people, the image of the gypsy card reader is their strongest association with tarot, and one that is constantly reinforced by popular culture. Bizet’s opera *Carmen* was a stereotypical representation of this fantasy; the fiery Andalusian gypsy girl Carmen reads her cards, turning them over one at a time until she reveals the Death card in the climax of the scene.<sup>27</sup> More recently, in *Last Love in Constantinople (Poslednja Ljubav u Carigradu)*, an unusual novel by Milorad Pavic, tarot was described as being in use among the gypsies.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Antoine Court de Gébelin, *Monde Primitif: Analysé Et Comparé Avec Le Monde Moderne, Considéré Dans L’histoire Naturelle De La Parole; Ou Grammaire Universelle Et Comparative*, 9 vols., *Archives De La Linguistique Française; No.95* (Paris: 1774).

<sup>24</sup> Arland Ussher, *The XXII Keys of the Tarot* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1969), pp. 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> Gates, ‘The Tarot Trumps’, p. 99. For Herodotus’ account of this invasion see Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. E.V. Rieu, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 206-210.

<sup>26</sup> Gates, ‘The Tarot Trumps’, p. 99.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Starkie, ‘Carmen and the Tarots’, *American Record Guide*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1964), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Milorad Pavic, *Last Love in Constantinople: A Tarot Novel for Divination*, trans. Christina Pribichevich-Zoric (London: Peter Owen, 1998), p. 5; Kaplan and Huets, *Encyclopedia of Tarot IV*, p. 471. The progression of the novel is determined by drawing tarot cards from a pack. Outlines of the cards are provided at the back of the book.

Many people mistakenly believed the gypsies had migrated from Egypt, and that the word 'gypsy' was in fact an abbreviation of 'Egyptian'.<sup>29</sup> Even though gypsies had been resident in Europe for around four hundred years, it was not until 1781, when Court de Gébelin espoused the idea that tarot was from Egypt, that people linked tarot with this wandering people.<sup>30</sup> Court de Gébelin spoke of the gypsies as having retained the Egyptian mode of divination by cards,<sup>31</sup> and this idea was further elaborated by Comte de Mellet. He believed that once the Egyptian priests had encoded their wisdom in the tarot cards, particularly in the trumps, the deck was given to the gypsies for safekeeping.<sup>32</sup>

This theory was reinforced by several authors who merely repeated the hypothesis with or without further elaboration. In 1854, for example, Boiteau d'Ambly in *Les Cartes à jouer et la cartomancie* espoused the theory that tarot, created solely for the purpose of fortunetelling, was transmitted to Europe by the gypsies.<sup>33</sup> Jean-Alexandre Vaillant, erroneously assumed to be the first to espouse a gypsy involvement, published a classic study in 1857, *Les Rômes, histoire vraie des vrais Bohémiens*, in which he detailed his theory of tarot originating with this nomadic people.<sup>34</sup> Vaillant was said to have lived for many years among this much-despised people and was allegedly instructed by them in their traditional lore. Much of the information he obtained was elaborated in *Les Rômes* and reinforced in *La Bible des Bohémiens* (1860) and *La Clef Magique de la Fiction et du Fait* (1863).<sup>35</sup> Another French occultist to reinforce tarot's association with Egypt was Etteilla, his unusual name obtained by simply reversing his surname: 'Alliette',<sup>36</sup> his given name being Jean-Baptiste. Born in 1738, he was thought to have died in 1791. A long tradition among occultists assigned him the profession of wigmaker, though in reality he

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<sup>29</sup> For example see Eden Gray, *The Complete Guide to the Tarot* (New York: Bantam, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Gates, 'The Tarot Trumps', p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> Court de Gébelin, *Monde Primitif*, p. 366.

<sup>32</sup> Depaulis, *Jeu Et Magie*, p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Dummett with Sylvia Mann, *The Game of Tarot: From Ferrara to Salt Lake City* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 136-137.

<sup>34</sup> Robert V. O'Neill, *Tarot Symbolism* (Lima: Fairway Press, 1986), pp. 41-42.

<sup>35</sup> Gérard Encausse, *The Tarot of the Bohemians: Absolute Key to Occult Science; the Most Ancient Book in the World for the Use of Initiates*, trans. A. P. Morton (Hollywood: Wilshire Book Company, 1971), p. 298.

<sup>36</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 106.

was a seed seller and subsequently he sold prints.<sup>37</sup> His book entitled *Etteilla, ou manière de se récréer avec un jeu de cartes* (*Etteilla, or a Way to Entertain Oneself with a Pack of Cards*), which was published in 1770 and subsequently reprinted in 1773 and 1783, constituted the first evidence of cartomancy in France.<sup>38</sup>

As early as 1782, Etteilla submitted a work to the royal censors, which was the standard practice at that time, called *Cartomanie [sic] Egiptienne, ou interprétation de 78 hieroglyphes qui sont sur les cartes nommées Tarots* (*Egyptian Cartomania, or Interpretation of the 78 Hieroglyphs which are on the Cards Called Tarots*).<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, the manuscript was not permitted to be published but there was no indication as to why.<sup>40</sup> Finally, between 1783 and 1785, Etteilla produced *Manière de se récréer avec le jeu de cartes nommées tarots* (*A Way to Entertain Oneself with the Pack of Cards Called Tarots*).<sup>41</sup> In this work, which was published in four parts, Etteilla in common with Court de Gébelin, ascribed an Egyptian origin to the tarot pack which he believed was originally intended to be a book written in symbols or 'hieroglyphs'.<sup>42</sup> According to Etteilla, tarot was designed by a panel of seventeen magi answerable to Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>43</sup> It was originated 171 years after the Flood, some 3 953 years before Etteilla was writing.<sup>44</sup> Again, card-makers took the blame for corrupting the original Egyptian form of the pack. Etteilla also maintained that all of the cards of the deck, not just the trumps, should be numbered as with other books.<sup>45</sup> He further designated that they should bear Arabic numerals rather than the usual Roman ones, as it was the Egyptians who invented the zero from which Arabic numerals were derived.<sup>46</sup>

Even though Etteilla gave precise instructions as to how to render the tarot trumps, he also suggested that an ordinary tarot card deck could be readily

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<sup>37</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 106.

<sup>39</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 107

<sup>40</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, p. 83.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival* (London: Rider and Company, 1972), p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> Roger Tilley, *A History of Playing Cards* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), pp. 100-101.

<sup>43</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 107

<sup>44</sup> McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 108

modified.<sup>47</sup> He directed the user to renumber the cards according to his scheme spelt out in *Manière de se récréer avec le jeu de cartes nommées tarots*. Then the user was instructed to write the first meaning on the card, reverse it and write the second meaning as directed in his book.<sup>48</sup> Etteilla made frequent references to the *Pimander*, one of the tracts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>49</sup> He reasoned that as tarot was the *Book of Thoth*, and Thoth was otherwise known as Hermes Trismegistus whose teachings were to be found in the *Pimander*, then it must be possible to find Hermetic knowledge in the tarot deck.<sup>50</sup> The theory of tarot's Egyptian provenance was reinforced by other French occultists such as Éliphas Lévi (1810-1875), Paul Christian (1811-1877)<sup>51</sup> and Gérard Encausse (popularly known as 'Papus'; 1865-1916).<sup>52</sup> Egypt was thought to be the source of all esoteric wisdom and the Egyptian hieroglyphics an ancient magical language, but it was not just the French who fell under the intoxicating spell of Egypt.

### **A Love of Egypt Across the Channel**

A British fascination with foreign cultures was facilitated by improved transport and communication, the ease of reproducing books and pamphlets, and the development of the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology. Topping this list of exotic cultures was that of Egypt. Even though the Rosetta Stone, and hence hieroglyphics, had been translated, Victorian society remained infatuated with all things Egyptian. One of the reasons was the extensive archaeological excavations that had taken place, exposing the grandeur and sophistication of Egyptian civilisation.<sup>53</sup> For occultists, Egyptian mythology held the double appeal of novelty and antiquity.<sup>54</sup> The British Museum, established by an Act of Parliament in 1756,<sup>55</sup> possessed an impressive collection of Egyptian antiquities built upon a group of artefacts

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<sup>47</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>48</sup> Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>49</sup> Katz, *The Occult Tradition*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> Gates, 'The Tarot Trumps', p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> See Jean-Baptiste Pitois, *The History and Practice of Magic*, trans. James Kirkup and Julian Shaw (London: Forge Press, 1952).

<sup>52</sup> See Encausse, *The Tarot of the Bohemians*.

<sup>53</sup> Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 40.

<sup>54</sup> Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn*, ed. Liam Miller (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972), p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Wortham, *British Egyptology*, p. 38.

assembled by Dr Hans Sloane<sup>56</sup> and the collection of travellers Colonel William Lethieullier and Pitt Lethieullier.<sup>57</sup> The collection was further bolstered by the surrender of the Rosetta Stone and other artefacts by the French after their defeat by the British in Egypt in 1801.<sup>58</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, the Keeper of the Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum from 1894 until 1924, obtained many artefacts for the Museum including cuneiform tablets, papyri and other manuscripts. His output of published works exceeded that of any other Egyptologist.<sup>59</sup> His *Book of the Dead: The Hieroglyphic Transcript into English of the Papyrus of Ani* (1895)<sup>60</sup> was to be enormously influential with British occultists. Another reason for Egypt's popularity was the Biblical narrative of the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt and many still believed in the literal truth of the Bible.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Egypt figured prominently in the works of classical historians and a person was not considered educated without some knowledge of the classics. This interest was fanned by the relative ease with which the Nile and the Egyptian monuments could be explored. Finally, the discoveries made in the relatively new discipline of Egyptology, including the ability to decipher hieroglyphics, aroused controversy and interest.<sup>62</sup>

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn arose in England towards the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction against the strict scientific rationalism and the shortcomings of conventional religion of the period. Although it never had more than three hundred members, its influence far exceeded that of many larger occult groups. The Order was the crowning glory of the occult revival, synthesising into a coherent whole a vast body of disparate material including Egyptian mythology, Kabbalah, tarot, Enochian magic, alchemy, Rosicrucianism and astrology. Suddenly anything was possible and everything was knowable; every mundane action and reaction could be reinterpreted in esoteric terms. People from all walks of life were attracted to the promise of power and knowledge, among them the three who would become the founders of the Golden Dawn; Dr William Wynn Westcott,

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<sup>56</sup> David, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Wortham, *British Egyptology*, p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> Wortham, *British Egyptology*, p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> Warren Royal Dawson and Eric P. Uphill, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, ed. M. L. Bierbrier (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1995), p. 71.

<sup>60</sup> E.A. Wallis Budge, *Book of the Dead: The Hieroglyphic Transcript into English of the Papyrus of Ani* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1960 [1895]).

<sup>61</sup> Wortham, *British Egyptology*, p. 92.

<sup>62</sup> Wortham, *British Egyptology*, pp. 92-93.

Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Dr William Robert Woodman.<sup>63</sup> The Order came into being on 20 March 1888.<sup>64</sup>

The rituals and learning of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn were drawn from a mysterious manuscript of indefinite origin. It contained fifty-seven pages written in a strange cipher alphabet that was created by Abbot Johann Trithemius and appeared in his book *Polgraphiae et Universelle Escriure Cabalistique* (1499).<sup>65</sup> Once deciphered, the manuscript contained brief outlines of five previously unknown rituals of a Rosicrucian nature in English.<sup>66</sup> Wynn Westcott, in the official history of the Golden Dawn, wrote that he obtained the Cipher Manuscript from the Reverend Adolphus Frederick Alexander Woodford.<sup>67</sup> This was almost certainly a fabrication. Though it is difficult to conclusively determine for which rite the rituals of the Cipher Manuscript were intended, it seems probable that they were created by esoteric Freemason and rabid ritualist Kenneth Mackenzie.<sup>68</sup>

Once the Cipher Manuscript was deciphered, William Westcott based the grade structure of the Golden Dawn on the grade structure published in the book *Der Rosenkreuzer in seiner Blöße* ('The Rosicrucian in his Nakedness') by Magister Pianco.<sup>69</sup> The Order accepted women who were addressed as *Soror* ('sister').<sup>70</sup> The Golden Dawn was actually only the first or Outer Order of three orders. The *Ordo Rosae Rubrae et Aureae Crucis* (R. R. et A. C.) was the Second or Inner Order, while the Third Order remained unnamed to the uninitiated. This Third Order was the realm of the guiding forces of the Order, the 'Secret Chiefs' or spiritual Masters whose mundane existence was hidden

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<sup>63</sup> Francis King, 'The Origins of the Golden Dawn', in *The Golden Dawn Source Book*, ed. Darcy Küntz (Edmonds: Holmes Publishing Group, 1996), pp. 123-124.

<sup>64</sup> Darcy Küntz, 'Introduction: From the Ashes of the Cipher Manuscript to the Creation of the Golden Dawn', in *The Golden Dawn Source Book*, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Carroll 'Poke' Runyon, 'An Analysis of the Cypher Manuscript', in *Secrets of the Golden Dawn Cypher Manuscript*, ed. Carroll 'Poke' Runyon (Silverado: C. H. S., Inc., 2000), p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> Francis King, *Ritual Magic in England: 1887 to the Present Day* (London: Neville Spearman, 1970), p. 42.

<sup>67</sup> William Wynn Westcott, 'The Historical Lecture', in *The Golden Dawn Source Book*, p. 48.

<sup>68</sup> Francis King (ed.), *Astral Projection, Ritual Magic, and Alchemy: Golden Dawn Material by S.L. Macgregor Mathers and Others* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1987), p. 32.

<sup>69</sup> Küntz, 'Ashes of the Cipher Manuscript', pp. 16-17.

<sup>70</sup> Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 11.

from all who had not yet proved themselves worthy.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, all of the temples of the Golden Dawn were dedicated to Egyptian gods.<sup>72</sup> A separate tarot lecture was also supplied to Golden Dawn initiates; its original form being among the folios of the Cipher Manuscript.<sup>73</sup> The trumps were referred to as “atus or mansions of Thoth” though elsewhere in the manuscript they were called ‘keys’.<sup>74</sup>

On 26 November 1898 a new member entered the Isis-Urania Temple of the Golden Dawn, introduced to the Order by alchemist George Cecil Jones otherwise known as *Frater Volo Noscere* (‘I want to know’).<sup>75</sup> The newcomer adopted the motto *Perdurabo* (‘I will endure’) alongside his real name of Aleister Crowley.<sup>76</sup> Crowley had received his Neophyte initiation at Mark Mason’s Hall and it was evident that he was a highly gifted magician. From Captain J. F. C. Fuller’s account in the *Equinox*, it could be deduced that Crowley advanced through the grades of the Golden Dawn quickly.<sup>77</sup> Those grades not formally separated by automatic delays he took at the rate of one a month, and the succeeding ones at the prescribed intervals of three, seven and nine months. By the time he had taken his Portal grade, Crowley’s morals and conduct offended those who were conducting Temple work in London and the ruling Adepti refused to advance him further.<sup>78</sup>

Crowley’s subsequent career was dogged by scandal and allegations of abuse. In 1913, he became the head of the British Branch of the *Ordo Templi Orientis* (O.T.O.), a German Society with links to the Martinists.<sup>79</sup> This office brought with it the grand title of ‘Supreme and Holy King of Ireland, Iona, and

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<sup>71</sup> Mary K. Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1995), p. 64.

<sup>72</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 150.

<sup>73</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 81.

<sup>74</sup> Ronald Decker and Michael Dummett, *A History of the Occult Tarot: 1870-1970* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2002), p. 81.

<sup>75</sup> Israel Regardie, *My Rosicrucian Adventure: A Contribution to a Recent Phase of the History of Magic, and a Study in the Technique of Theurgy* (Chicago: The Aries Press, 1936), p. 22-23.

<sup>76</sup> Robert A. Gilbert (ed.), *The Golden Dawn Companion: A Guide to the History, Structure, and Workings of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Decker and Dummett, *History of the Occult Tarot*, p. 107.

<sup>78</sup> Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 191.

<sup>79</sup> John Symonds, *The Great Beast: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (London: Rider and Company, 1951), p. 121.

all the Britains that are in the Sanctuary of the Gnosis'; Crowley referred to himself as 'Baphomet'.<sup>80</sup> In the same year, he published the *Liber Legis* (*The Book of the Law*), which contained material told to him some years earlier in Cairo by a spiritual visitor called Aiwaz.<sup>81</sup> Crowley believed Aiwaz was Horus who was also one of the Golden Dawn's Secret Chiefs but simultaneously his higher self and guardian angel.<sup>82</sup> The text predicted the 'Age of Horus', which heralded the foundation of a new religion which would supplant all others.<sup>83</sup> Crowley was urged to form a new movement of élite Thelemites.<sup>84</sup> The term was originated by French Renaissance writer François Rabelais, whose hero Gargantuan founded the Abbey of Theleme where all Christian values were inverted. This ribald author was a strange source indeed for an Egyptian deity! The tarot was mentioned within the *Liber Legis* with trump figures featuring in some of the numerological puzzles posed by Aiwaz.<sup>85</sup>

Though Crowley had always been interested in and worked with tarot, it was not until 1944 that he published the *Book of Thoth: A Short Essay on the Tarot of the Egyptians*.<sup>86</sup> Limited editions of two hundred copies were released simultaneously in London and New York. Crowley adhered to the Golden Dawn system of symbolism and artist Lady Harris, having urged Crowley to refine his tarot designs, subsequently painted them.<sup>87</sup> The paintings were unveiled on 1 July 1942 at the Berkeley Galleries in London.<sup>88</sup> The Thoth Tarot deck portrayed symbolism from a vast array of traditions and cultures; Crowley was obsessed by the search for commonalities between divergent systems and mythologies. This passion for syncretism was characteristic of

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<sup>80</sup> Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 218.

<sup>81</sup> The full title of the work is *Liber L vel Legis sub figura CCXX, as delivered by LXXVIII unto DCLXVI*. See Aleister Crowley, 'Liber L Vel Legis Sub Figura CCXX, as Delivered by LXXVIII Unto DCLXVI', *The Equinox* vol. I, no. X (1913). It is also available from the *Sacred Texts* website at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/oto/engccxx.htm>. Accessed 24/04/11.

<sup>82</sup> John Symonds, 'Introduction', in *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, eds John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (London: Arkana, 1979), pp. 19-20.

<sup>83</sup> Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 212.

<sup>84</sup> Decker and Dummett, *History of the Occult Tarot*, p. 148.

<sup>85</sup> Decker and Dummett, *History of the Occult Tarot*, p. 148.

<sup>86</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 159.

<sup>87</sup> Gerd Ziegler, *Tarot: Mirror of the Soul: Handbook for the Aleister Crowley Tarot* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1986), p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom*, p. 251.

Victorian England, which sought to learn more about its own fundamental nature by comparing itself to other cultures. It was a quest for the fundamental truths which all esoteric systems and religions were thought to contain. The deck was never published during the lifetimes of either Crowley or Harris.<sup>89</sup> It was not until 1969 that Major Grady L. McMurty, who had helped Crowley publish his *Book of Thoth*, had the paintings photographed and published. Unfortunately, the reproductions were of a poor quality. In 1977, Gerald Yorke with the assistance of Stephan Skinner had the paintings photographed again. These photographs form the basis of contemporary editions of Crowley's Thoth Tarot,<sup>90</sup> and the deck, taking its name from an Egyptian God, would become one of the most popular decks of all time.

### The Name of Tarot

Just as theories of an Egyptian derivation for tarot have proven popular, so have theories supporting an Egyptian derivation for the term 'tarot'. Antoine Court de Gébelin wrote that the word was derived from an Egyptian phrase 'Ta-Rosh' meaning 'the royal way' or the 'royal road of life'.<sup>91</sup> Gérard Encausse in *The Tarot of the Bohemians* (1889) stated that "the whole Tarot was based upon the word ROTA, arranged as a wheel." He equated TARO with INRI (the initial letters of the Catholic monogram, *Iesus Nazaraeus Rex Iudeorum*, and of the Freemasonic formula *Ignis Natura Renovatur Integra*), and with YOD-HE-VAU-HE, the Hebrew Tetragrammaton.<sup>92</sup> Another theory held that this Latin word for wheel, *rota*, demonstrated an Egyptian link as it was no more than an anagram of the name of the Egyptian goddess 'Ator', a form of 'Hathor'. Some see evidence of this connection in the naming of the tenth trump or 'The Wheel of Fortune'.<sup>93</sup> Alfred Douglas exploited this fascination with the alleged Egyptian origins of tarot, mentioning the term's possible derivation from the name of Thoth, the ancient Egyptian god of magic.<sup>94</sup> Others maintained that it derived from 'tarosc' in which the 't' was

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<sup>89</sup> Ziegler, *Tarot: Mirror of the Soul*, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> James Wasserman, *Instructions for Aleister Crowley's Thoth Tarot Deck* (Stamford: U.S. Games Systems, Inc., 1978), p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 104.

<sup>92</sup> Encausse, *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Cynthia Giles, *The Tarot: History, Mystery and Lore* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Gates, 'The Tarot Trumps', p. 12.

the article, the ‘a’ meant ‘doctrine’ or ‘science’ and ‘*rosic*’ represented Mercury or Thoth, thus giving ‘the doctrine of Thoth’.<sup>95</sup>

MacGregor Mathers also saw ‘tarot’ as being derived from the Egyptian word ‘*táru*’ which allegedly meant ‘to require an answer’ or ‘to consult’; and that the second ‘t’ was added to denote the feminine gender.<sup>96</sup> Mrs John King van Rensselaer claimed that Egyptologist Sir John Gardner Wilkinson stated that ‘tarot’ was a derivative of ‘*thror Tahar*’ which “were the parchment records kept in the Temple, which are mentioned in the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty [and] that were written on skins.”<sup>97</sup>

### **Why Cannot It Be So?**

The hypothesis of an Egyptian provenance for tarot can be discounted on several grounds. First, the ancient Egyptians did not have paper or cardboard with which to construct tarot cards. Some occultists explained away this difficulty by insisting that the tarot images were painted on gold, ivory or on wall panels.<sup>98</sup> It is difficult to see how this could be consistent with the idea that the Egyptian priests encoded their wisdom in a card game. Second, if tarot cards were in fact created in Egypt, then we would expect that at least some remnants would have been discovered. In addition it seems likely that the deck would have been adopted by neighbouring countries and some record of them or extant decks would be preserved there. Further, if they did contain Hermetic information, this too would have survived among Muslim esotericists, common in the cities of the Middle East at that time. Also, we would expect to discover some evidence of their transmission to Italy, in trade logs or inventories.<sup>99</sup>

The most compelling reason we have to disregard this theory was that Egyptian symbolism did not resemble that of the tarot. As more and more sites were excavated and the images studied and catalogued, it became progressively clearer that Egyptian iconology was radically different from that of the tarot. As tarot scholar Robert O’Neill stated;

[t]he gods are humans with animal heads. The icons are full of nature figures: chicks, snakes, vultures, hawks, ibises. These natural figures appear as elements of the hieroglyphics but are completely absent

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<sup>95</sup> Alessandro Bellenghi, *Cartomancy*, trans. Julie Almond (London: Ebury Press, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> Decker and Dummett, *History of the Occult Tarot*, p. 58.

<sup>97</sup> Mrs John King van Rensselaer, *Prophetical, Educational and Playing Cards* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd, 1912), p. 34.

<sup>98</sup> Robert M. Place, *The Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>99</sup> Decker and Dummett, *History of the Occult Tarot*, p. 178.

from the tarot. None of the most important images or themes of Egyptian knowledge are found in the Tarot. Horus as the hawk, the scarab pushing the sun across the sky, the preoccupation with preparing the soul for the journey to the afterlife.<sup>100</sup>

This theory of an Egyptian origin of tarot gained currency because of France's pre-Rosetta infatuation with all things Nilotic and the subsequent adoption of the ancient culture into esoteric lore. It was reinforced by the erroneous belief that 'Gypsy' was in fact a contraction of 'Egypt'. By the time the truth was revealed, esotericists had already forged a permanent link between tarot and Egypt that historical fact could not supplant.

### Contemporary Egyptomania

In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, more recent sources also maintain an Egyptian origin for tarot, an appealing example of which can be found in the obscure books of prose poems written by Mrs Anna M. Fullwood. *The Song of Sano Tarot* (1946) stated that the tarot was "the ancient Egyptian doctrine of Equilibrium." Fullwood received all of her information from clairvoyant visions.<sup>101</sup> William Lindsay Gresham in his novel *Nightmare Alley* (1947), had Zeena, a clairvoyant and mystic in a travelling circus, ascribe an Egyptian origin to the tarot.<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, a significant number of contemporary New Age sources, in spite of the speciousness of this Egyptian theory, still maintain that tarot was born in the sands of Egypt and that the tarot deck contains all the wisdom of humankind.<sup>103</sup>

The New Age is an intoxicating mix of East and West, where Buddhist Tantra bumps up against Native American shamanism, crystal healing, and past-life regressions. Auras are examined, angels are consulted, and groups gather to meditate for peace and environmental healing. Tarot is an integral part of this worldview, its symbolism confidently projecting each of these apparently divergent streams to emerge as the New Age tool *par excellence*. Previously, occultists looked for the one true tarot; they 'rectified' or

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<sup>100</sup> O'Neill, *Tarot Symbolism*, p. 57.

<sup>101</sup> Though attributed to Nancy Fullwood, this book was allegedly channelled by Mrs Anna M. Fullwood. See Gates, 'The Tarot Trumps', p. 41.

<sup>102</sup> William Lindsay Gresham, *Nightmare Alley* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1947), pp. 59-60.

<sup>103</sup> David Allen Harvey, 'Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism, Politics, and Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Fin-De-Siècle', *The Historian*, vol. 65, no. 3 (2003), p. 676.

‘corrected’ the deck in accordance with their beliefs.<sup>104</sup> They believed that the one true tarot had either been purposefully altered to conceal its true purpose and meaning, or it had been carelessly copied resulting in an inadvertent loss of significance. With the advent of the New Age, tarot designers felt able to ‘re-imagine’ the deck, no longer afraid to experiment, comfortable with creating links to other cultures or to create decks that fulfilled roles other than divination.<sup>105</sup> Though the broad history of tarot has been well established, New Age authors tenaciously cling to the erroneous histories presented as fact by esotericists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Egypt is still frequently cited by authors as being the ‘home’ of tarot, where the deck was crafted in order to conceal all manner of magical and spiritual secrets. It is not uncommon for New Age tarot books to perpetuate the idea that tarot definitely or possibly originated in Egypt.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, there are many tarot decks that utilise an Egyptian theme thereby continuing the traditional association of esoteric tarot with Egypt, a constant theme since its inception in eighteenth-century France.

The *Egipcios Kier Tarot* (1984) deck serves as an educational device, elaborating the beliefs, practices, and social hierarchies of Egyptian culture.<sup>107</sup> The trump cards show human figures rather than the gods and goddesses. For example, the card of the High Priestess shows the priestess of Isis rather than Isis herself.<sup>108</sup> The cards depict various professions such as the Charioteer or Labourer, but also cards that serve as a commentary on social conditions such as Magnificence, which describes how nobles set up their homes.<sup>109</sup> The major arcana cards are each marked with a hieroglyph, an alchemical sigil, a letter

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<sup>104</sup> Rachel Pollack, ‘An Overview of the Variety of New Tarot Decks: Emphasis on European Decks’, in *New Thoughts on Tarot: Transcripts from the First International Tarot Symposium*, eds Mary K. Greer and Rachel Pollack (North Hollywood: Newcastle Publishing, 1989), p. 124.

<sup>105</sup> Pollack, ‘Overview of the Variety’, p. 124. Some authors also encourage ‘seekers’ to create their own decks. See Antero Alli, ‘The Neuro-Tarot: Designing Your Own Deck of Cards’, *Whole Earth Review*, no. 72 (1991).

<sup>106</sup> Stuart Kaplan takes a detailed look at the place of Egypt in tarot lore. See ‘The Ancient Egyptian Temple’, in Kaplan and Huets, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. IV, pp. 699-720.

<sup>107</sup> Emily E. Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Typology* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), p. 104.

<sup>108</sup> Rachel Pollack, *The New Tarot* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1989), p. 107.

<sup>109</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 106.

derived from a magical alphabet found in the *Key of Solomon the King* that had been translated by MacGregor Mathers, a planetary symbol, an astrological sign, and also a Hebrew letter. The minor arcana cards do not follow the traditional structure and instead are numbered twenty-three to seventy-eight, each card bearing an allegorical picture without a suit sign.<sup>110</sup>

The *Tarot of Transition* deck presents the major arcana as the gods and goddesses of Ancient Egypt. The order of the trumps is rearranged to illustrate the mythological journey of the soul after death.<sup>111</sup> Hence, the deck directs the querent to enact the soul's appearance before its judges after death rather than the traditional fortunetelling or psychological interpretations normally ascribed to tarot consultation.<sup>112</sup> The *Tarot of Transition* court is populated by the Pharaoh, the Queen, the Charioteer and Ushabti.<sup>113</sup> Their task is to assist the querent in the Land of the Dead. Similarly, the four suits are redesigned to align with Egyptian symbolism; they become Ankhs (the key of life, Swords), the backbone of Osiris (Wands), Heket (the communion chalice, Cups) and Khepera (the Sun, Coins).<sup>114</sup> Other examples of tarot dominated by 'Egyptian' imagery include the *Ibis Tarot* (1991) by Josef Machynka,<sup>115</sup> the *Egyptian Tarot (I Tarocchi Egiziani)* (1996) designed by M.O. Wegener and Silvana Alasia,<sup>116</sup> Clive Barrett's *Ancient Egyptian Tarot* (1994), the *Barath Egyptian Serigraphs* (1980) by Victorino del Pozo and the artist Suarez,<sup>117</sup> the *Book of Doors Tarot* by Athos Vegi,<sup>118</sup> the *Scarab Tarot* (1981) of Kathleen Binger,<sup>119</sup> and the *Egyptian Tarot 22* (1987) of Yoshio Karashima.<sup>120</sup>

Inexorably linked with the supposed Egyptian origins of tarot is the idea that gypsies took the deck to Europe and wherever else they travelled. This theory can be dated to when gypsies were thought to be of Egyptian origin;

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<sup>110</sup> Stuart R. Kaplan, *The Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. III (Stamford: U.S. Games Systems, Inc., 2002), p. 578.

<sup>111</sup> Pollack, 'Overview of the Variety', p. 135.

<sup>112</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 105.

<sup>113</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 106.

<sup>114</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 106

<sup>115</sup> Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks*, p. 104.

<sup>116</sup> Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks*, p. 104.

<sup>117</sup> Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. III, pp. 92-93.

<sup>118</sup> Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. III, pp. 111, 15.

<sup>119</sup> Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. III, pp. 470, 72-73.

<sup>120</sup> Kaplan and Huets, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. IV, p. 631.

‘gypsy’ being a contraction of ‘Egypt’.<sup>121</sup> There are several decks that seek to make this connection explicit. The *Zigeuner Tarot* (1982) was painted by Walter Wegmuller, a self-professed Rom (Gypsy) and the imagery has been imported from Romany culture. For example, the Chariot is pulled by a goat and a chicken, animals commonly found in a Romany camp.<sup>122</sup> Another tarot designer that exploits this theme is Tchalai Unger with her *Tarot Tzigane* (1984).<sup>123</sup> Not only is the Romany way of life expressed through the tarot symbolism but a discussion of the history is contained within the accompanying booklet.<sup>124</sup> There are only thirty-eight cards in this deck with twenty-two of them loosely resembling the traditional major arcana cards, with the addition of sixteen pip cards including a court of Father, Mother and Child and four Aces.<sup>125</sup> The suit signs are linked to the four main Romany branches: the Kalderash of Central Europe, the Manush of Northern Italy, the Gypsies of Ireland and the Gitanos of Andalusia.<sup>126</sup> The suits are further linked to four tools that correspond more or less to the traditional tarot suits: knives or scalpels (Kalderash, Swords); coins (Manush, Coins/Pentacles); pots, hoods, or containers (Gypsies, Cups); and wooden sticks or musical instruments (Gitanos, wands).<sup>127</sup> The trump sequence details a version of the history of the Romany as formulated by the Rom themselves. It begins with their descent from the Rajput Princes who were displaced from their kingdom, forming different bands.<sup>128</sup> It also encompasses the Rom belief that their people were from the stars and will ultimately return there. The penultimate trump, *O Geape Vimanaki*, shows a *lingam* and *yonis* figure representing the union of male and female elements. It also displays the spaceship, *Vimana*, which will return the Romani to their stellar home. The last trump, *Tataghi* (Heart of Fire),

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<sup>121</sup> For example see Eden Gray, *The Complete Guide to the Tarot* (New York: Bantam, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 94.

<sup>123</sup> Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. III, p. 641.

<sup>124</sup> See Tchalai Unger, *Preface to the Tzigane Tarot (Tarot of the Roms)*, trans. Josee Noel (Paris: Ets J. M. Simon, 1984).

<sup>125</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 97.

<sup>126</sup> Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. III, p. 641.

<sup>127</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 97.

<sup>128</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 96.

depicts the ultimate meaning of this journey, the return of the Rom to the place of their cosmic and divine origin.<sup>129</sup>

The *Buckland Romani Tarot* (2001) also explores the alleged link between tarot and gypsies.<sup>130</sup> Raymond Buckland was the son of a gypsy and in the book accompanying the *Romani Tarot* he describes his fascination with the deck of cards that his grandmother spent so much time poring over. Buckland directed artist Lissane Lake to paint the deck, thereby casting his ideas into material form.<sup>131</sup> The symbolism of the deck closely resembles that of the Colman-Waite pack with some notable exceptions: the Magician is female, supposedly because the majority of gypsy ‘magicians’ are female; likewise the Priestess of trump II becomes the *Puridai* or matriarch of the tribe. The figures on the cards are depicted as gypsies. On trump VIII – Strength, a beautiful woman opens the jaws of a performing bear rather than a lion.<sup>132</sup>

The persistence of this erroneous association of tarot with gypsies eloquently illustrates the New Age fascination with other cultures, and in particular, the romance associated with this wandering race. In part, this fascination derives from the portrayal of gypsies in the media as mysteriously dark and beautiful, frequently associated with divination, folklore, and magical practice. To most people even now, the origins of gypsies are obscure, as they keep to themselves or are kept to themselves by discrimination and persecution within the wider community, enabling New Age seekers to form their own romantic notions of this race, which rarely resemble reality. Most contemporary users of tarot are completely unaware of the deck’s true origin in the courts of northern Italy and are more likely to assign an Egyptian or gypsy provenance to the deck. They are also ignorant of tarot’s original function as a deck for game playing. The alteration of the structure of many New Age packs renders them completely unsuitable for this original purpose. Tarot has become the New Age tool *par excellence*. It is easily accommodated within the shifting patterns of use, which has seen the focus of divination move from ‘fortune-telling’ to that facilitating self-development and healing. Indeed, many modern decks have been designed specifically to enable spiritual as well as physical healing which have become inexorably linked, the symbolism displayed on the cards reflecting this function.

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<sup>129</sup> Pollack, *The New Tarot*, p. 96. Interestingly through this deck, Unger shows an awareness that gypsies came from India, even if their ultimate origin did lie in the stars.

<sup>130</sup> Kaplan and Huets, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. IV, p. 250.

<sup>131</sup> Kaplan and Huets, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. IV, p. 250.

<sup>132</sup> Kaplan and Huets, *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, Vol. IV, pp. 252-253.

### **Almost Right**

This article has examined the persistent association of esoteric tarot and Egypt, examining the cultural milieu in which this connection arose to reveal that this idea was largely grounded in the pre-Rosetta infatuation with all things Egyptian in France. This link was to prove durable, also being adopted by esotericists in England besotted by the emerging field of Egyptology and immersed in the exploration of cultures removed in both geography and time. Once firmly established, modern day tarotists, with more access to esoteric texts than scholarly journals, have perpetuated this erroneous idea of an Egyptian origin for tarot.

But perhaps they are almost right. The playing-card deck first appeared in Europe towards the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>133</sup> Almost by a process of elimination, it becomes likely that the immediate progenitor of the regular European playing-card deck was from the Islamic world, as Europe had little direct contact with countries not mediated by Islam. The cards could have entered Europe via Muslim Spain or via Italy. In fact, the commercial privileges of Venetian traders were protected by a treaty negotiated with the Mamlūk Empire of Egypt and Syria in 1302<sup>134</sup> and again in 1345.<sup>135</sup> In 1939, archaeologist L.A. Mayer stumbled across an almost complete pack of cards from the Egyptian Mamlūk Empire in the Topkapı Sarayı Museum in Istanbul. The deck was dated as being from the fifteenth century by comparison with Egyptian illuminated manuscripts of this period.<sup>136</sup> Of fifty-two cards, forty-eight had survived consisting of four suits: Swords, Polo-Sticks, Cups, and Coins, each composed of ten numeral cards and three court cards headed by the King.<sup>137</sup> The Mamlūk suits translated into the corresponding Italian suits with the exception of Polo-Sticks that became Batons,<sup>138</sup> probably because polo was

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<sup>133</sup> Gherardo Ortalli, 'The Prince and the Playing Cards: The Este Family and the Role of Courts at the Time of the Kartenspiel-Invasion', *Ludica: annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*, vol. 2 (1996), p. 175.

<sup>134</sup> Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250-1382* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 117.

<sup>135</sup> Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages*, p. 130.

<sup>136</sup> Detlef Hoffmann, *The Playing Card: An Illustrated History*, trans. C.S.V. Salt (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1973), pp. 18-19.

<sup>137</sup> Dummett with Mann, *The Game of Tarot*, p. 39; Olsen, 'Carte De Trionfi', p. 37.

<sup>138</sup> Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks*, pp. 2-3.

not popular in Europe at that time.<sup>139</sup> So even though the origins of the tarot deck itself have been traced to the Visconti court of Milan, its progenitor, the regular playing card deck, did in fact have its origins in the ancient land of Egypt.

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<sup>139</sup> Various authors have stated that polo was unknown in Europe at this time but this is not true. The Crusaders took the game back to France in the twelfth century though it did not become popular until much later. See H.E. Chehabi and Allen Guttmann, 'From Iran to All of Asia: The Origin and Diffusion of Polo', *The International Journal for the History of Polo*, vol. 19, no. 2-3 (2002), p. 390.