

THE MINOR ARCANA

by Christine Payne-Towler

When the Major Arcana is removed from the Tarot, a pack of cards remains that is almost identical to a modern deck of playing cards. Earliest Tarot manuscripts make a clear distinction between the twenty-two Majors (Trumps) and the rest of the cards. Stuart Kaplan cites this as evidence that they originated as two separate entities.

Kaplan points us to a deck of cards called Mamluk, which may have originated in Turkey, or which came to Europe from Asia through Turkey. It has four suits numbering one through ten with four or five royalty each, for a total of fifty-two or fifty-six cards. A pack from the 1400s is in the Topkapu Museum in Istanbul, and may represent the originals from which the Italian suit symbols were drawn. Stuart Kaplan also mentions the



TEN OF COINS
MAMLUK DECK

Trappola decks as an alternate form of Minor Arcana Tarot; these have the expected four suits, but with only three royalty and six numbered cards each. Both these types of cards appear in Europe during the same time frame as the earliest Tarots, so it's difficult to say for sure if they preceded Tarot or sprang up along with it. Their presence suggests that the Minor Arcana can and did

stand alone in some packs and that they possess an internal structure independent of the Majors.

Historians believe such cards as these may show us how the twenty-two Major Trumps became a seventy-two card deck. If the Mamluk was actually a progenitor of the modern Tarot, then we would have to assume that its authors were in harmony with the synthesis of the Kabbalah, Pythagorean number theory and astrology that you will read about in this essay. It would be very hard to retrofit the interface of these three distinct symbol sets over a pack of cards if those cards weren't originally designed to accommodate them.



ACE OF COINS
MAMLUK DECK

If your deck is designed for divination, it has pictures of humans involved in various activities, and you do not notice the resemblance to playing cards nearly as much. But the striking and obvious feature of an esoteric Tarot is a stark geometric, numerical and elemental treatment of the numbered suit cards, along with royalty that exemplify the zodiac and the characters that enact its central myths. As such, it looks almost exactly like a common bridge deck.



The Four Elements

The common denominator of the Minor Arcana from all decks is that they belong in suits—the traditional four suits of the bridge deck (hearts, clubs, spades, diamonds) or their earlier, more elemental forms (Cups, Wands, Swords and Coins). The Minor Arcana can be subdivided further to differentiate the royalty from the numbers, but they all participate equally in the four-way breakdown by element--water, fire, air and earth. Additionally, these four elements symbolize the four "worlds" of traditional magical practice: the worlds of the mind, heart, will and body. The four seasons, marked by the equinoxes and solstices, are also drawn into the symbolism of the suits by representing time and its passage through the quadrants of the year. In the case of the Spanish-influenced Tarots particularly, even though the symbols of the elements are occasionally interchanged one for another, there are still always four that embody the values of the elemental worlds.

In the course of examining the aces and the royalty of a number of older Tarots, I began to see patterns I now believe were part of the common knowledge shared by Tarot makers and practitioners from the first appearance of Tarot in Europe in the early 1440s. I want to suggest what I have come to see in these Tarots, but let us think of these ideas as working hypotheses rather than fixed theories. I hope they prove interesting enough to stimulate future publications from those who can enlighten us further.

The Suits and Their Symbolism

The four suits have been used as vehicles to carry symbols and images drawn from underground spiritual movements too controversial to stand in print in their own right. Each

element represents its own mythos clearly enough for those who know how to look for it, but veiled enough to deflect the suspicion of the Inquisitors should a deck fall into their hands.

For example, the suit of Cups in some esoteric Tarots seems to be dedicated to the heresy of the True Royal Family of Europe, which asserts a blood-line purportedly stemming from the marriage of Jesus of Nazareth and Mary Magdalen. This lineage was supposedly transplanted into southern Spain when Mary Magdalen fled the Holy Land after the crucifixion. Those Tarot decks which support this theme will show the cup in the hand of the King or Queen boiling, smoking, or full of blood.. The knight may evoke echos of a Templar, and the Page may appear shackled or in front of an ancient toppled tree.



XXXVII
MASTER OF CUPS
KING OF CUPS
IBIS DECK

The suit of Wands can be seen bearing the Mason's marks which spell out the numbers one to ten, possibly representing grades of initiation in the secret lodges of Europe. Each grade would be a tempering achievement of the will toward the Divine, through the self-divining practices mapped out within the orders.

The suit of Coins has been attributed, card by card, to the planetary governors of ancient astrological pantheons, regularly invoked through Hermetic and later Renaissance talismanic magic. The numbered Coins are



often inscribed with sigils drawn from Gnostic, Hebrew and Persian magical grimoires.

Only the suit of Swords seems to marginally evade this type of overlay of esoteric themes, although the Ace of Swords is often embellished. The Swords may have received different treatment because they carry the inherent meaning of ideological conflict, wars and communication problems, a universal dilemma in every generation, sect and situation. With careful scrutiny, one can see these themes riding alongside the regular, divinatory, simplistic meanings of the suit cards as agreed upon in the common tradition.


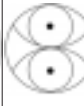




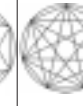
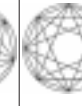
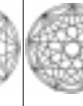
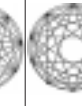
As we view the interior architecture of the suit cards, you may be surprised at how much symbolism can be packed into such stripped-down imagery. It is easy to miss the profound depth built into the Minor Arcana if you do not know to look for it, because in the Hermetically inspired Tarots, the cards themselves seem so plain. Every attempt was made to refrain from stimulating emotions with the cards so the profundity of the symbols and interior correspondences could register on the unclouded mind. This approach allows the reader to construct a wide range of meanings

for any given card rather than rely on a cartoon that may limit its significance and application to the current situation.

The cards 1-10 of each suit simultaneously embody the Gods of Number, the main energy centers in the human body (called Sephira by the Hebrews), and the planets in the solar system. Anyone who had procured the so-called classical education of the Renaissance would be able to recognize how each system corresponded to the cards, so that just seeing the suit symbols and the Arabic numerals on the faces of each card would bring up associations from sacred geometry, Kabbalah and astrology. The magi of the sixteenth or seventeenth century would have learned to "triangulate" between these three systems as they studied the meanings of the Minor cards, and their understanding of what any given card represents would be enhanced by that expanded view. Thus used by one who truly understands it, Tarot is truly a philosophical machine.

The Hermetics of Number Theory in the Minor Arcana

Inherent design principles, organic and re-

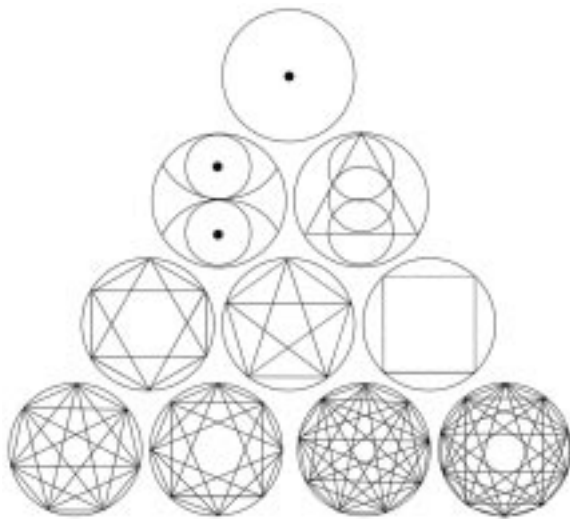
NUMBER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
GEOMETRY										
ARCANUM	Magus	Priestess	Empress	Emperor	Heirophant	Lovers	Chariot	Justice	Hermit	Wheel
SEPHIROTIC CORRESPONDENCE	Keter	Chakmah	Binah	Chesed	Gevurah	Tiferet	Hod	Netzach	Yesod	Malkuth
RULING PLANET	♈	♎	♈	♋	♊	♉	♏	♍	♌	♈

CORRESPONDENCES OF THE DECAVE



peated everywhere, attract the attention of thinking souls no matter what their language or culture. From very ancient times, philosophers recognized that Nature inclines toward certain arrangements and away from others, and canny thinkers began to see the ratios involved—literally, to "rationalize" the geometry of Nature. By the height of Egyptian culture, two thousand years before the life of Jesus, numbers themselves were seen as gods to be handled very carefully in order not to disturb their dispositions.

The turning point between the mentality of antiquity, which envisioned humanity as the pawn of Nature and the gods, and the beginning of the modern worldview, which turned toward self-cultivation and the development of



TETRACTYS

the human powers of mind, is marked by the work of Pythagoras, a sixth century BC teacher, scholar and prophet.

By the time of Pythagoras, mathematical thinking had penetrated the geometry hidden

within whole numbers. An even more sophisticated symbolism emerged to portray the geometric solids proceeding from numbers, revealing the special properties of each number in its own world, resonating at its own frequency. From this perspective, the relations between numbers or their frequencies gave birth to harmonic theory, which Pythagoras revealed to the world through the medium of music, but which governs relations macrocosmically amongst the stars, and simultaneously, amongst the atoms. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that all of Nature at every level is related through dynamics which could be expressed as interwoven harmonic ratios that are interacting.

Pythagoras used numerals as his first principles. In his philosophy, the whole numbers embraced and illustrated the Great Laws of Nature. He studied the properties of numbers and their relations not only in the realm of music but also in the realms of astronomy and philosophy.

The quintessential figure that Pythagoras invented to visually express his philosophy, called the Tetractys, is composed of ten discs arranged as a pyramid, each disk bearing the geometric figure of a whole number. We have shown it here in two forms—first as described above, and second with the internal relationships between stations in the pyramid lined out.

Call this the Mysticism of the Decave, the religion of base-ten enumeration. Contemplation of this remarkable doctrine leads right into sacred geometry and harmonic theory, and illustrates the classical understanding of beauty: symmetry, proportion, harmony, ratio and grace. Classical Greek culture reached a



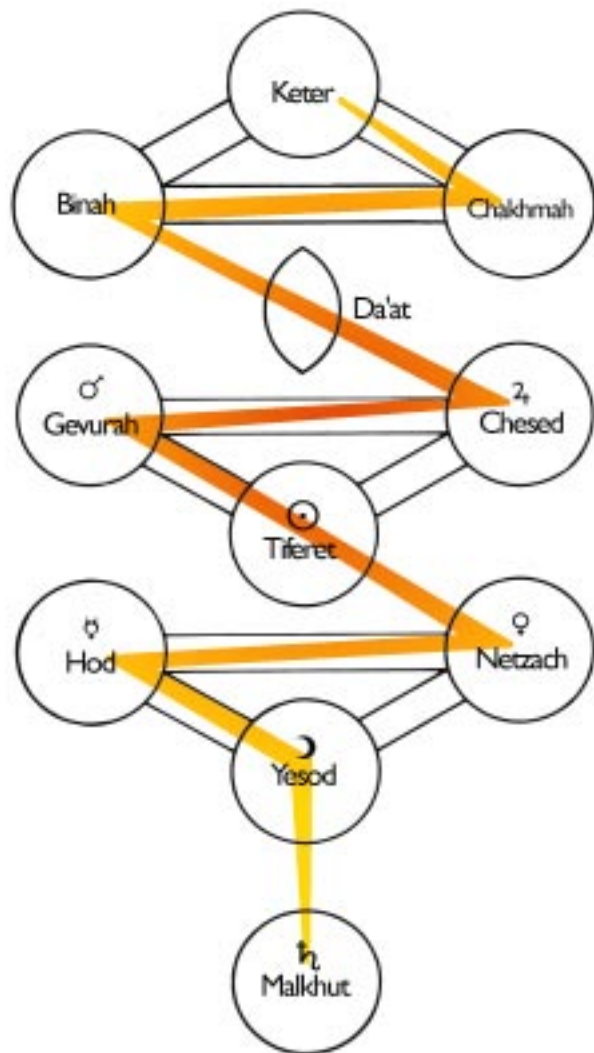
pinnacle in art and architecture in the century following Pythagoras, and his fame spread to what was then the ends of the world.

Every numbered card in a Tarot deck partakes of the innate geometry of the number that rules it. One is a whole, so every ace represents pure potential in one of the four elements. Two divides and polarizes, so each two expresses a dichotomy. Three gives polarity a fulcrum to balance upon, mediating extremism and harmonizing each of the elements. Four crystallizes and solidifies, so potentials acquire a framework on which to actualize. Five forces individuation and challenges creativity, eliciting vision and imagination. Six is yin and yang, two threes intertwined, fertile and furthering. Seven strives for the mastery depicted by the spiritual triangle surmounting the material square.

Eight is the test of interlaced squares, implying the wheel of the year and the challenge of survival from season to season. Nine is three threes, the "triple ternary," balance of balances, the so-called perfect number. Ten folds the circle of the numbers into a cycle, recapitulating the one at the next higher level. (In Tarot terms, the tens are each transforming into the ace of the next element in the chain of ascent/descent.) In the different elemental worlds, the numbers will appear with different emphases (like the difference between the Five of Swords and the Five of Wands), but the principles of the single digits rule the numbered suit cards of Tarot.

Extending this line of reasoning, the Major Arcana cards that bear the single digits are also reflected downward into the numbered suit cards. So, for example, the Hierophant, number five, rules the fives in all four suits,

while the Chariot stands behind all the seven cards, the Justice underlies the eights, the Hermit upholds the nines, and the Wheel personifies the tens. You really are supposed to see, for example, the qualities of the Emperor embodied in the numeral four, implying the cube, the 90-degree angle, and the principle of materialization in each of the elements. These are all examples of the same principle at work. A student's job is to learn these correspondences until they are second nature.

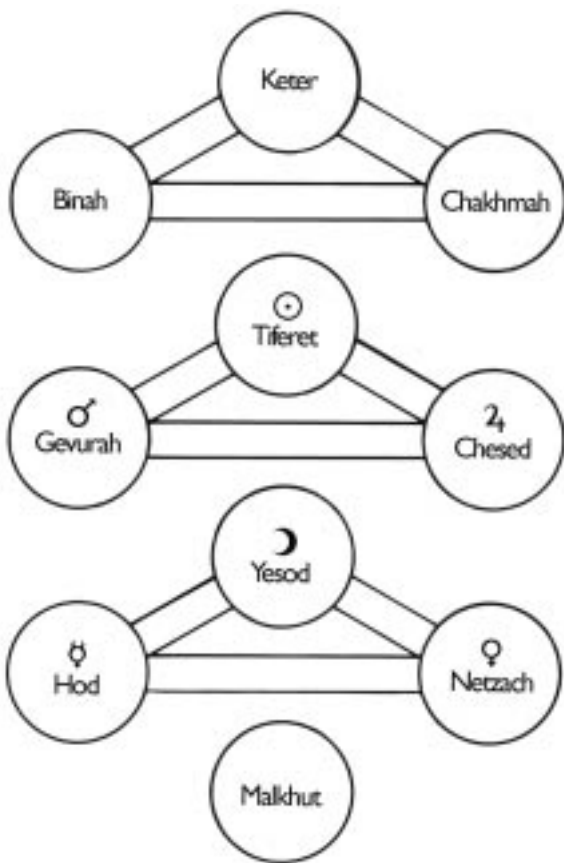


LIGHTNING-STUCK TREE
"THE FALL"



Kabbalah and the Minors

The ancient Hebrews had their own Mystery of the Decave which Pythagoras was known to have studied in his travels around the Mediterranean. It was portrayed in many forms, but when it was described, it was called the "Doctrine of Emanations." In a nutshell, it expressed the way that the Origin of All opened itself and poured into successive vessels, one emerging from the last, in a series of ten great waves of creativity. As such, our entire world has been created by these great waves of energy emerging from the One, and humans are also constructed with this built-in tenfold pattern.



UNFALLEN HUMAN

The creation of the world is conceptualized as a top-down procedure whereby the subtle forces at the top of the chain of creation are stepped down into successively denser and more material energies, to finally reach the tenth stage in the material world we experience with our senses. When the soul's descent is complete the energies reverse, and the soul begins to rise back up the Kabbalah Tree by the same path it descended (the combination of paths called the Lightning Bolt). The ascent of the soul is a classic theme occupying every aspect of the ancient Mystery School, and that path of ascent is mapped out by the 1-10 cards of the Tarot.

The logic is this: There is a complete Tree in each of the four elemental worlds, and we must climb each rung of this ladder to win our immortality and get off the Wheel of Incarnation. The ten rungs at the very bottom are represented by the earth cards (Coins). This suit involves the process of rising through the ten stages of material success, which culminates at the boundary of the emotional/psychic life. The next stage up is represented by the water cards (Cups). This level brings one to an understanding of the subjective life of fantasy, dream, sentiment and psyche. When that realm has been crossed, the fire cards (Wands) represent the next challenge in which the Will is tempered and tamed, like raw ore in the melting pot. The topmost reaches of the ladder are depicted by the air cards (Swords), the realm of the ideal or archetype, where the Mind of God contemplates the ideas behind the forms of matter. Passage through this sphere implies deconstructing the mind map created by one's acculturation, so that consciousness can be free to ascend to higher and higher levels of mystical apperception.



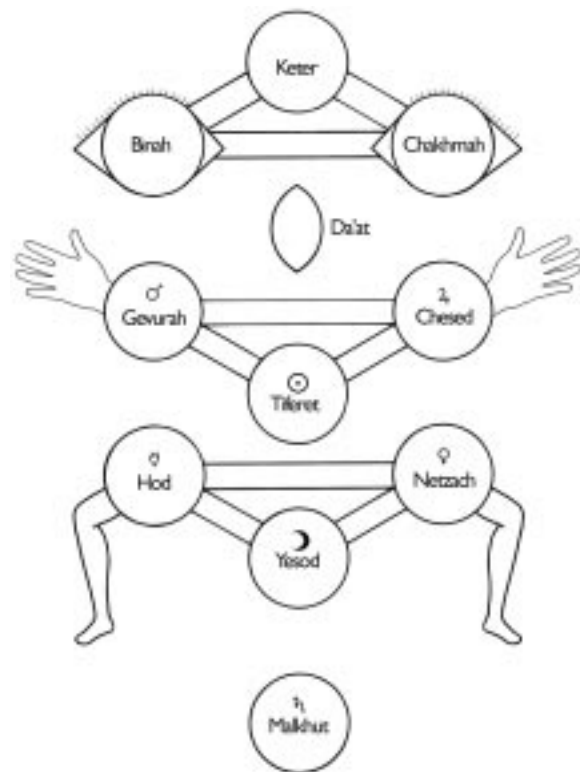
The Kabbalah Tree's grid pattern that links the ten centers is a linear diagram made up of three vertical bars connected by a matrix of horizontal and diagonal bars interwoven to resemble the scientific drawing of a molecule. This diagram represents the way in which humans are "made in God's image." If you imagine this "molecule" superimposed upon your body, your backbone aligned with the Middle Pillar, it is easy to sense the five nodes that appear at the points where the horizontals, diagonals and verticals converge. Two shorter pillars, each with three nodes, close the sides of the diagram, representing the left and right eyes, hands, and legs.

The system is similar to the Hindu chakra system, but the emphasis in the Hebrew Middle Pillar is on the number five rather than on the seven chakras of the East. The nodes of the two side pillars express, distribute and administer the energies aroused and pooled in the Middle Pillar. The version of the Kabbalah Tree illustrated here represents a diagram of our energetic circuitry *after* the fall from Eden to eros. This "fallen" Tree no longer resembles the divine original, Adam Kadmon, which was the signature of the original creation (see essay on Kabbalah/Cabbalah).

To restore ourselves and the fallen creations, according to the Kabbalists, our souls must retrace the steps we took in falling. Rising from the bottom of the Middle Pillar we first encounter Malkuth, the earth, foundation, root, body. Next up is the node called Yesod, which rests around the gonads and balances our hormones, emotions, feelings, psychic life and instincts. The Moon is traditionally equated with Yesod. The next node above is Tifareth, which encompasses what the Hindus would separate into two different chakras called Will

and Heart. The Hebrews did not see a way in which an individual could have a personal will that contradicted divine will, so they lumped the two together in what was called the "heart." The sun of our solar system is equated to Tifareth, standing at the center unifying and organizing the whole, around which everything circulates.

Above Tifareth is Da'at, a node that exists as potential in everyone but which a person has to work on to activate. This corresponds to the Hindu throat chakra, the power of the Holy Word to create by fiat. This power is something that must be earned through effort and striving, aligning the lower nodes and directing will toward overcoming the distractions of the left and right pillar.



FALLEN HUMAN



When divine order is restored, Saturn will occupy this center. As the last visible planet in the solar system, it is the symbol of limits, discipline, examinations and natural consequences. It is Saturn who occasionally makes us eat our words. He is also the one who sentences us to live out our most frequently repeated fears and pessimisms. He is the lord of the bottom line, the have-to's that no one can escape. The ancients used to say that Saturn was the final judge of whether we reincarnated again and again or whether we could pass on from this world into a higher state. (see also the essay "The Gnostic Tarot").

At the top of the Middle Pillar is Kether, which would correspond to a fusion of the third eye and the crown centers in the Hindu system. Actually, the point that Kether represents is the pineal gland deep in the brain, the organ that metabolizes light for the body. All the vertical channels—left, right and center—emerge from this point to descend into matter; conversely, all the channels converge on this point when ascending toward more refined states of being.

The set of three nodes on each pillar left and right represents the two eyes, two arms and hands, and two legs and feet. The three to the right in the diagram are called the Father Pillar, and their rising action is oriented toward contemplating the inner workings of God. The pillar to the left in the diagram, called the Mother Pillar, is directed in a descending manner, showering attention upon the outer world of things, beings, time and space. In relation to the distinct genders of the two outer pillars, the Middle Pillar is considered to be androgynous, neither male nor female, but partaking in the nature of the Divine Child Within.

What must be noted here, and what the Hebrew people managed to conceal from the Gentiles for several centuries after the invention of the printing press, is that you have to "back into" this diagram when superimposing it onto your body, so that the Mother Pillar stands on your right side and the Father Pillar stands on your left. Energy surges up the left side, over the top, and down the right before plunging into the earth below, only to surge up the left side again. This is part of the message of the Wheel of Fortune card in the Major Arcana: We each exist within a circulating vortex of life force which we must learn to manage and utilize. The first organizing principle is that it all circulates around the heart.

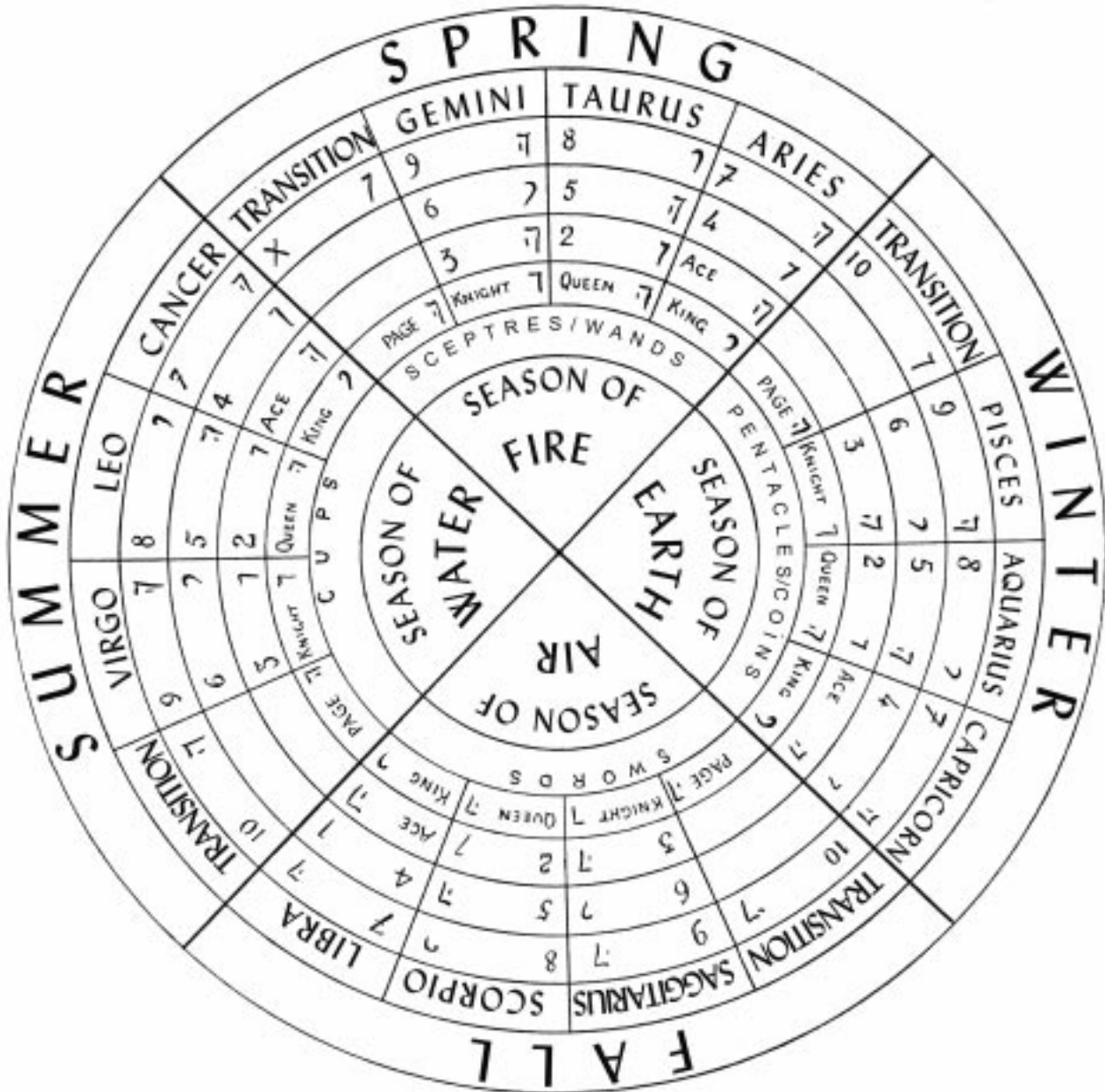
Astrology and the Minors

Next for consideration is the zodiac of the 360-degree heavens wrapped around the Earth that has been distributed among the numbered Minor cards. For purposes of prediction and ritual applications, these could be the most well-used group of correspondences of the whole canon.

The great genius of the Babylonian numbering system is that Babylonian astrological priesthood devised a scheme whereby the fundamental unit of measurement is expressed in both spatial and temporal terms simultaneously. To do this they had to:

- (a) work within the ancient world's already-established preference for counting on our ten fingers,
- (b) determine a number which when multiplied by ten would express in whole numbers the full circle of the visible and invisible sky wrapped around the earth: the formula is $(10 \times 3) \times 12 = 360$,
- (c) harmonize the divisions of space marked





SUIT CARDS ON THE WHEEL OF THE YEAR
DERIVED FROM PAPUS

out by the formula with the then-traditional Mansions of the Moon (an earlier, lunar division of the zodiac) and determine which twelve major constellations would be used to anchor the new zodiac for all future time, and

(d) develop the correspondence between one degree of movement in space and one unit of time elapsed in the course of making that movement. (This formula states that it takes four minutes of time to move the stars rising over the eastern horizon by one degree.)



In the process of inventing the modern paradigm of time and celestial motion, the Babylonians employed the Indian Brahmin concept of zero, so helpful in sophisticated calculations that go beyond the single, whole numbers. The entire world uses variations on this astrological system, and our modern space program would never have happened without this creative interpretation of the boundless distances and time scales presented by the spin of the Earth on its axis while pursuing its yearly trek around the sun.

When the Minor Arcana are drawn into this scheme, we again have to face the issue of fitting a 10-based form of counting onto the 360-degree sphere mapped by the ancients to track the ticking of the cosmic clock. The accommodation made was very clever: Taking into account the bias in this enumeration system for 3x10, each sequence of suit cards is divided into three threes, with each card representing ten degrees of zodiacal space, (five degrees for a card upright and a different five degrees for the card reversed). This leaves one card left over in each element to represent the equinoxes and solstices which mark out the four seasons. It's essentially the Wheel of the Year, with either the aces or tens standing in for the four high holidays celebrating the changing of the seasons. We see this system illustrated at the top of each Porta della Stella Minor Arcana card, to help the user “find themselves” in the zodiac.

Some schools of Tarot go even further into the astrology of the Minor Arcana, attributing a planetary ruler to each 10-degree segment of each sign, and including these subrulerships into the divinatory meaning of the card. The French esoteric group were the first to print the Hebrew angel-names for each 5-degree

segment of the zodiac right on the cards. These angels are to be prayed to, contemplated upon, or evoked when asking for help with the issues represented by the cards in a spread and/or the hot spots in a person's birth chart (see the essay “Kabbalah/Caballah”).

The Royalty

Now that we have covered the underlying constructs inherent in the numbered cards, let us turn our attention to the royalty who complete the Minor Arcana. It is well known that the zodiac is represented in twelve of the sixteen royal personages pictured through the four elements, but different Tarots deviate in how the twelve are derived from the sixteen. The most standard pattern, matching the method used in the 1–10 cards above, distributes the royalty around the seasonal calendar, placing the fire cards (usually the Wands) in the spring, the water cards (most often Cups) in the summer, the air cards (usually Swords) in the fall, and earth cards (mostly the Coins) in the winter. Used this way, the Kings are the cardinal signs starting into each season, the Queens are the fixed signs at the center of the seasons, and either the Pages or the Knights are used to symbolize the mutable signs that close out each season. (Whichever royalty is left over, whether the Knight or the Page, is used as a messenger or harbinger of change in each of the four suits.) Tavaglione's Tarots demonstrate this pattern on the royalty.

That scheme is simple and easy to remember, and quite possibly very old, but it is not likely to have much appeal to an astrologer because it glosses over the way in which the elements and the modes actually interact within the unfolding seasons of the natural year. If we start with Aries as the cardinal sign that initiates spring, we see the correspondence of



the Wand (fire) with spring. But the sign that naturally follows Aries is Taurus, which is indeed a fixed sign yet is of the element earth, not fire. The next sign following Taurus is Gemini, a mutable sign indeed but of the element air, not fire.

In astrological fact, no element rules for an entire season uninfluenced by the other elements. So the more sophisticated, and possibly more modern, esoteric Tarots apportion the Wands royalty to the fire signs, the Cups royalty to the water signs, and so on, dropping the connection with the seasons and more accurately representing the flow of natural time around the wheel of the year. The English-influenced Tarots use a modified form of this pattern. As above, the Knights or Pages not corresponded to the mutable signs become messengers and bringers of change, like the stagehands between acts of a theater piece who rearrange the sets for the advancing plotline. I, for one, like to use the astrologically attuned method, with the Queens as the cardinal signs, the Kings as the fixed, the Pages as the mutable, and the Knights as the agents of change between the seasons.

Much benefit can be derived from studying the first ten Major Arcana lined up with the Tetractys, the Numbers 1–10, the Sephira of Kabbalah, and the planets of the solar system in their mythological personalities. After you have explored this expanded array of correspondences for your first ten Arcana, look again at how those Arcana/numbers might express themselves in the numbered cards of the four suits. The graph on page 3 will help you remember the parallel correspondences between the three systems as they apply to the Minor Arcana.

This chapter is excerpted from Christine Payne-Towler's forthcoming book, *The Underground Stream: Esoteric Tarot Revealed*. To order copies of her book, or to reach Christine for private consultation call 1-800-981-3582.

