

The Evolution of Playing Cards

Culture, History, and Mechanics

John M. Quick

Evolution of Cards from China

"Cards basing their symbols on dice exist in many different forms throughout China, and it is possible with their aid to trace the gradual evolution of these playthings from knucklebones through dice and dominos."

Wilkinson, *Chinese Origin of Playing Cards*, 1895, p. 67



Sheep astragalus, Merv, 9th century
Image Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum

如是我聞一時薄伽梵蓮花化樂國寶嚴城

住樂音闍下廣大滿堂八千人俱皆莊嚴
訶摩三萬六千是國王及王弟諸王士女
咸集又人日人等先覺大梵悉欲圍遶而為
說法

今時羅刹室利法王子承佛威神說摩訶起
闍維一者目昧音起曰薄伽梵世尊言乎曰
言此摩訶闍維起如是相相諸佛言乎言乎
大伽維摩詰曰此今法門者言即諸佛言說利
樂修法修持實有情能

此時世尊問羅刹室利法王子言言武王言乎
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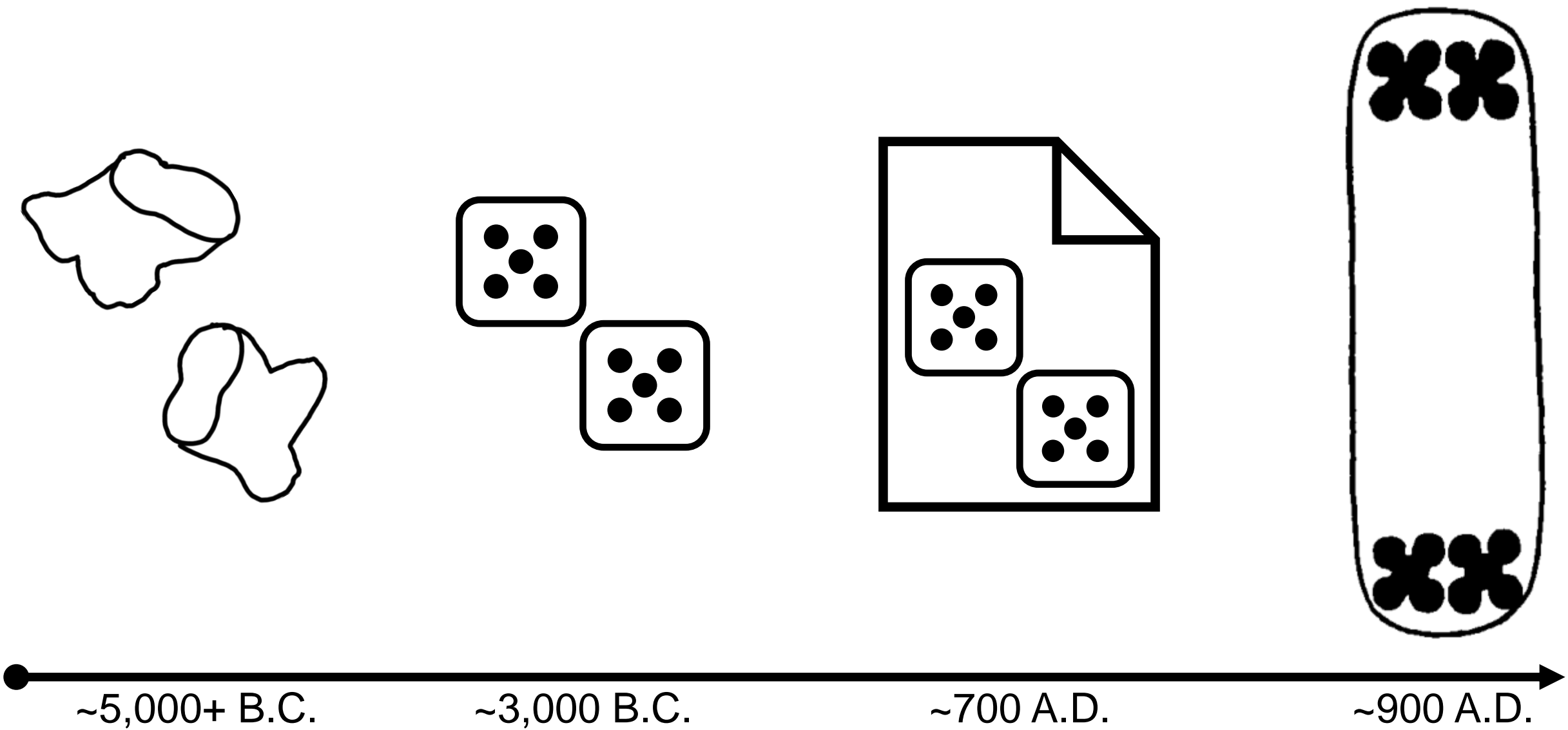
Tang dynasty scroll, mid-7th to mid-8th century
Image Copyright Smithsonian Institution



Diamond Sutra, May 11, 868
Image Copyright The British Library

"Among the books thus made up into tablets were works on dice games. As these were in constant use for reference, "tablets" or "leaves" in this way became synonyms for dice, and finally were used in the place of dice—and thus ["leaves"] grew into cards."

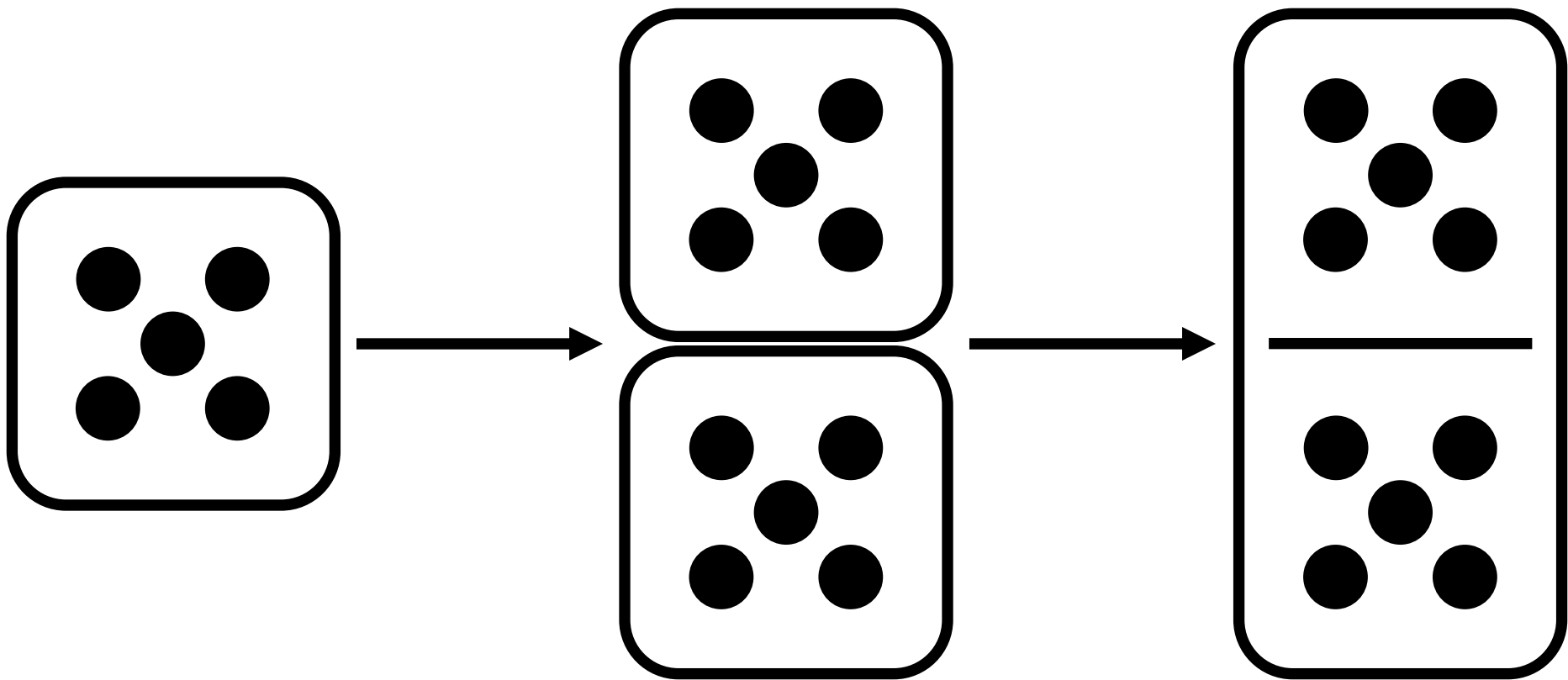
Wilkinson, *Chinese Origin of Playing Cards*, 1895, p. 64



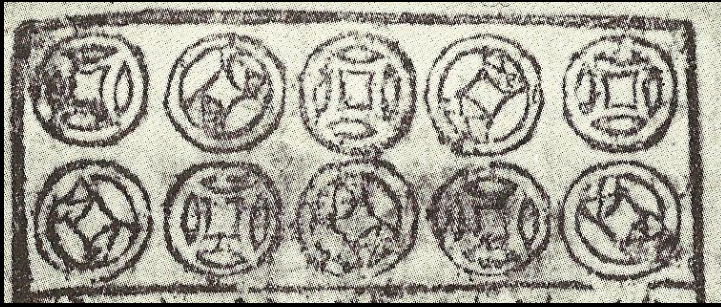
Challenge

You've seen how dice evolved into cards.

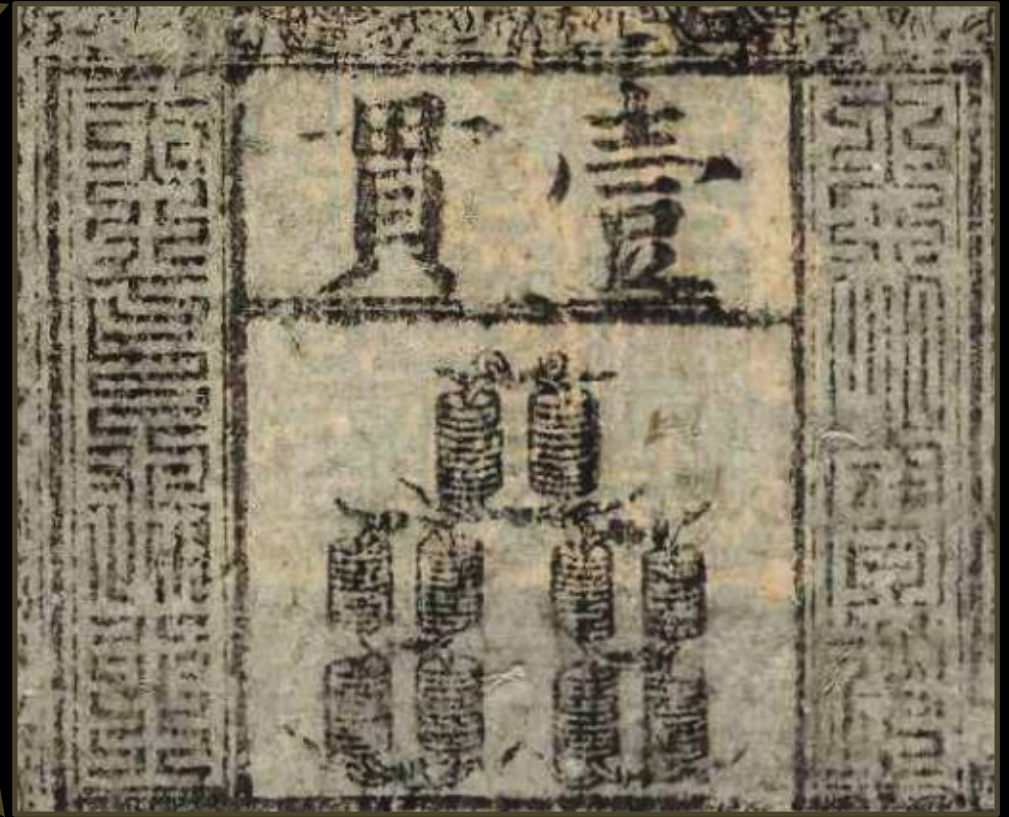
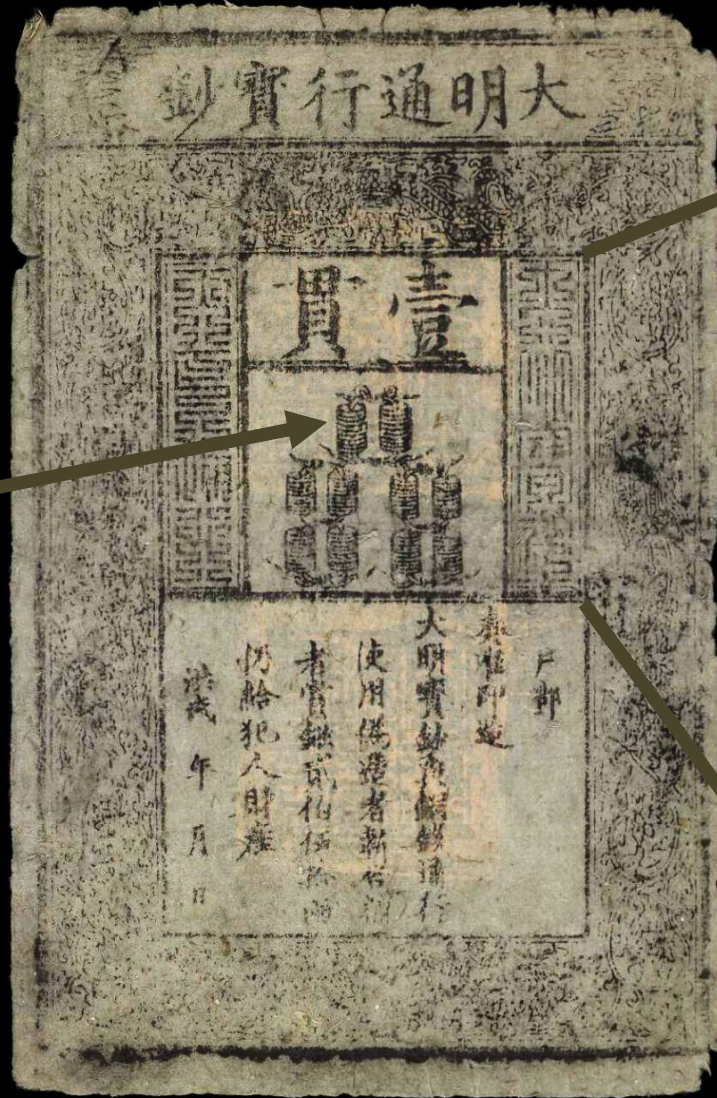
How could dice evolve into dominos?



Component	Material	Purpose
Dice	Cube	
Cards	Paper	Generate random numbers and form combinations
Dominos	Tablet	



Song dynasty coin, 10th – 13th century, British Museum
Song dynasty banknote, 11th century, 9780521086905



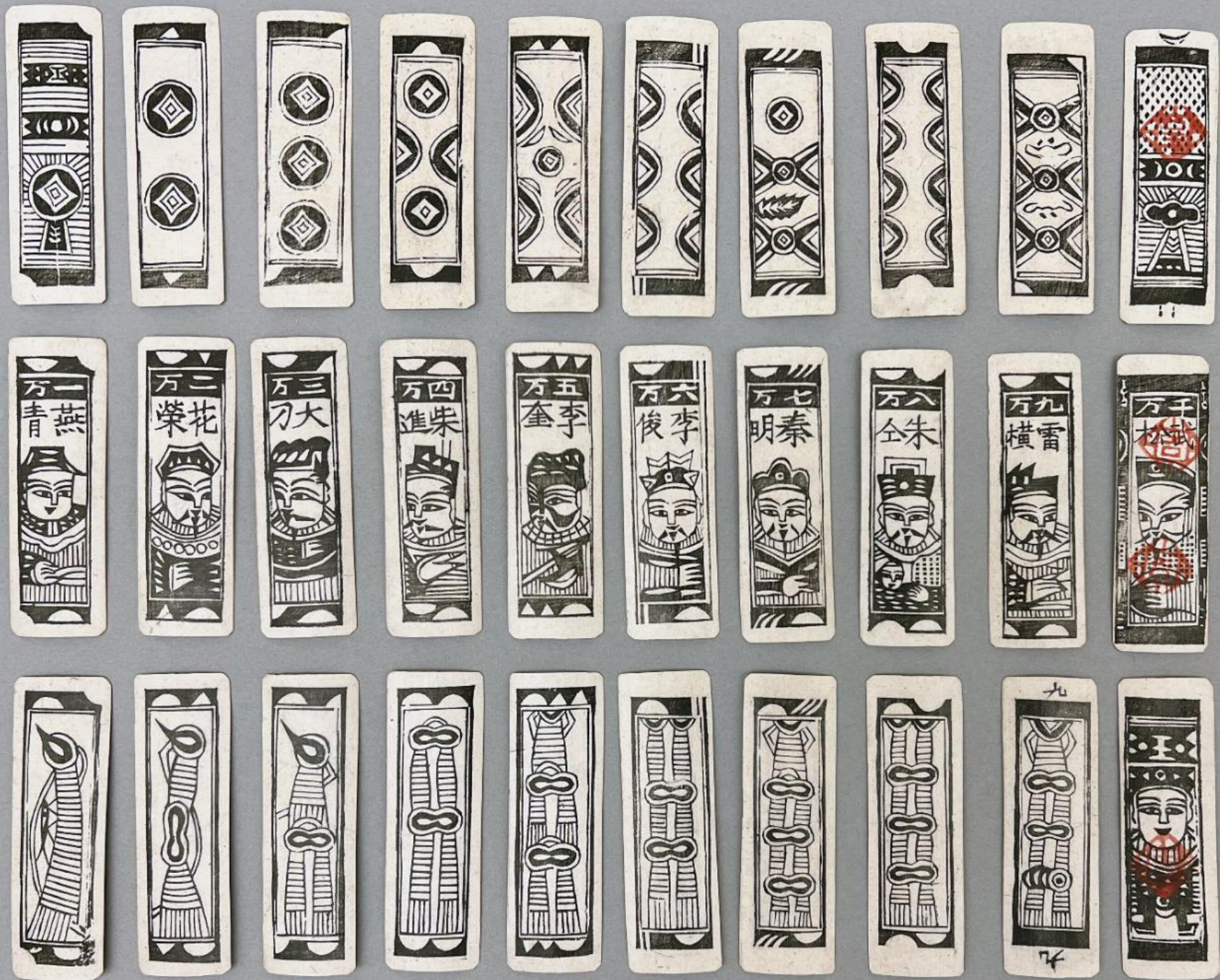
Song dynasty coin, 10th – 13th century
Ming dynasty banknote, 13th century
Image Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum



Chinese stick cards, 19th century
Image Copyright Penn Museum



5 Golds



Chinese stick cards, 19th century
Image Copyright Penn Museum



Chinese stick cards, 19th century
Image Copyright Penn Museum

30 Card Deck





3 Suits



Coins

Strings

Myriads

Red Flower

3 Coats

White Flower

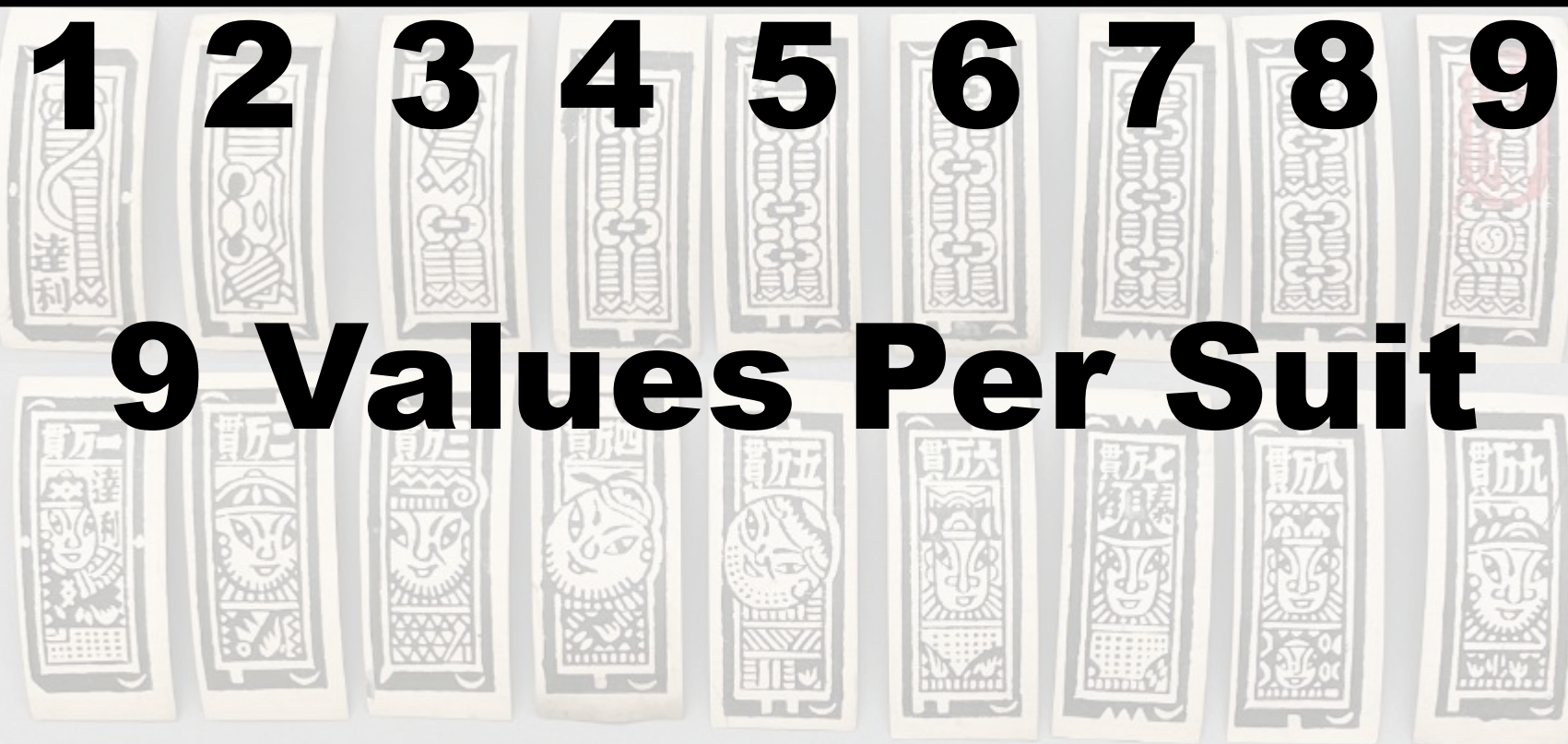
Old Thousand





1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

9 Values Per Suit



Challenge

Which card from the modern Western 52-card deck is missing?

Why is it missing?

"The cards... are or originally were *bank notes*, for *which and with which the gamblers played*."

Wilkinson, *Chinese Origin of Playing Cards*, 1895, p. 68

Suits	Value
Coins	100 – 900
Strings	1,000 – 9,000
Myriads	10,000 – 90,000
Coats	Value
Red Flower	100,000
White Flower	1,000,000
Old Thousand	10,000,000

Influence on European Cards

Challenge

How do modern Western 52-card decks differ from the Chinese Song money cards?



Coins



Coins



Strings

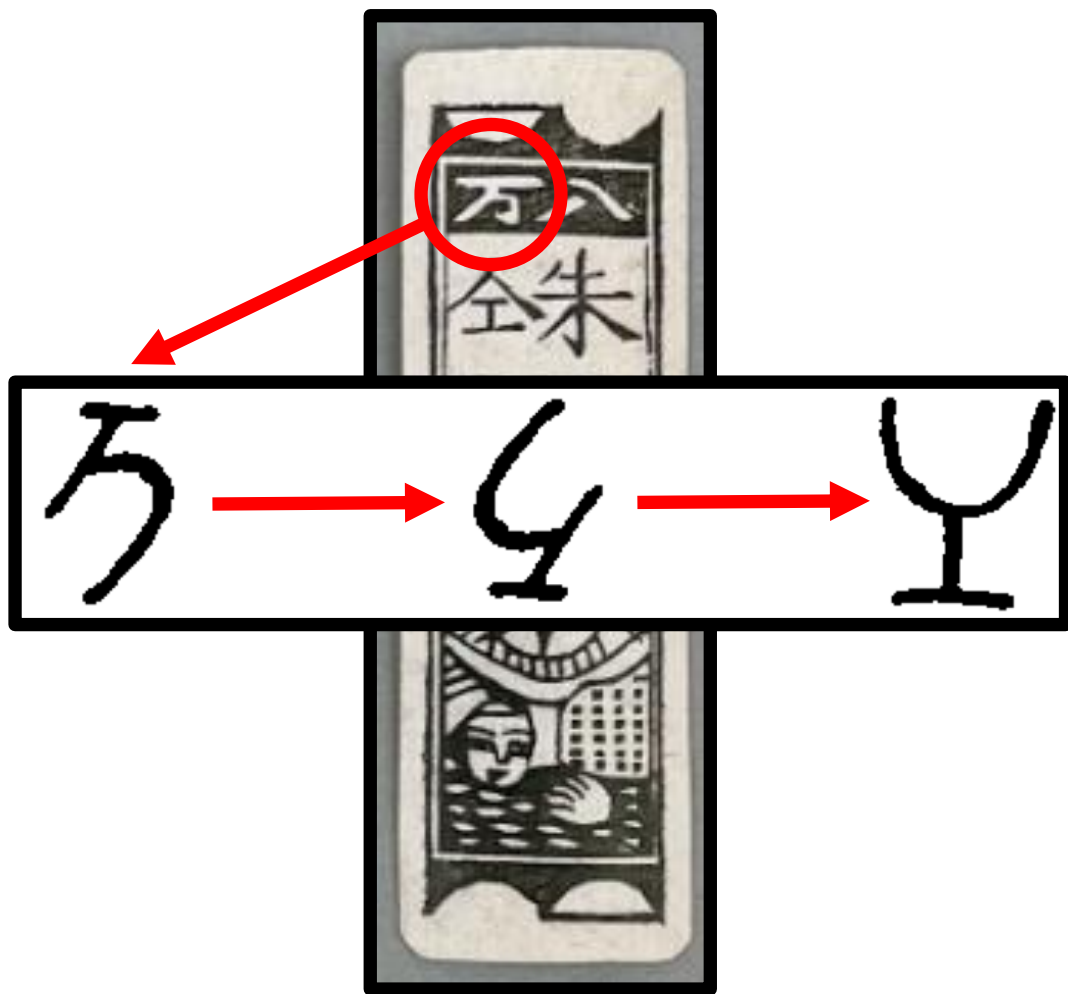


Sticks

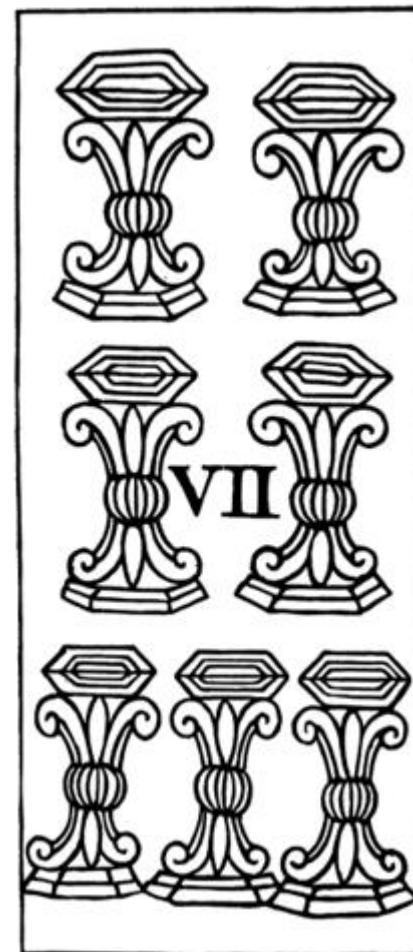
Challenge

How would you interpret the suit of these cards?





Myriads



Cups

Nation

Suits

Italy/Spain



Cups



Coins

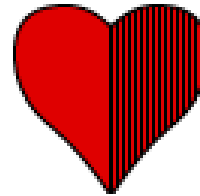


Sticks



Swords

Germany



Hearts



Bells



Acorns



Leaves

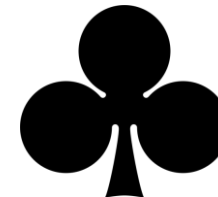
France



Hearts



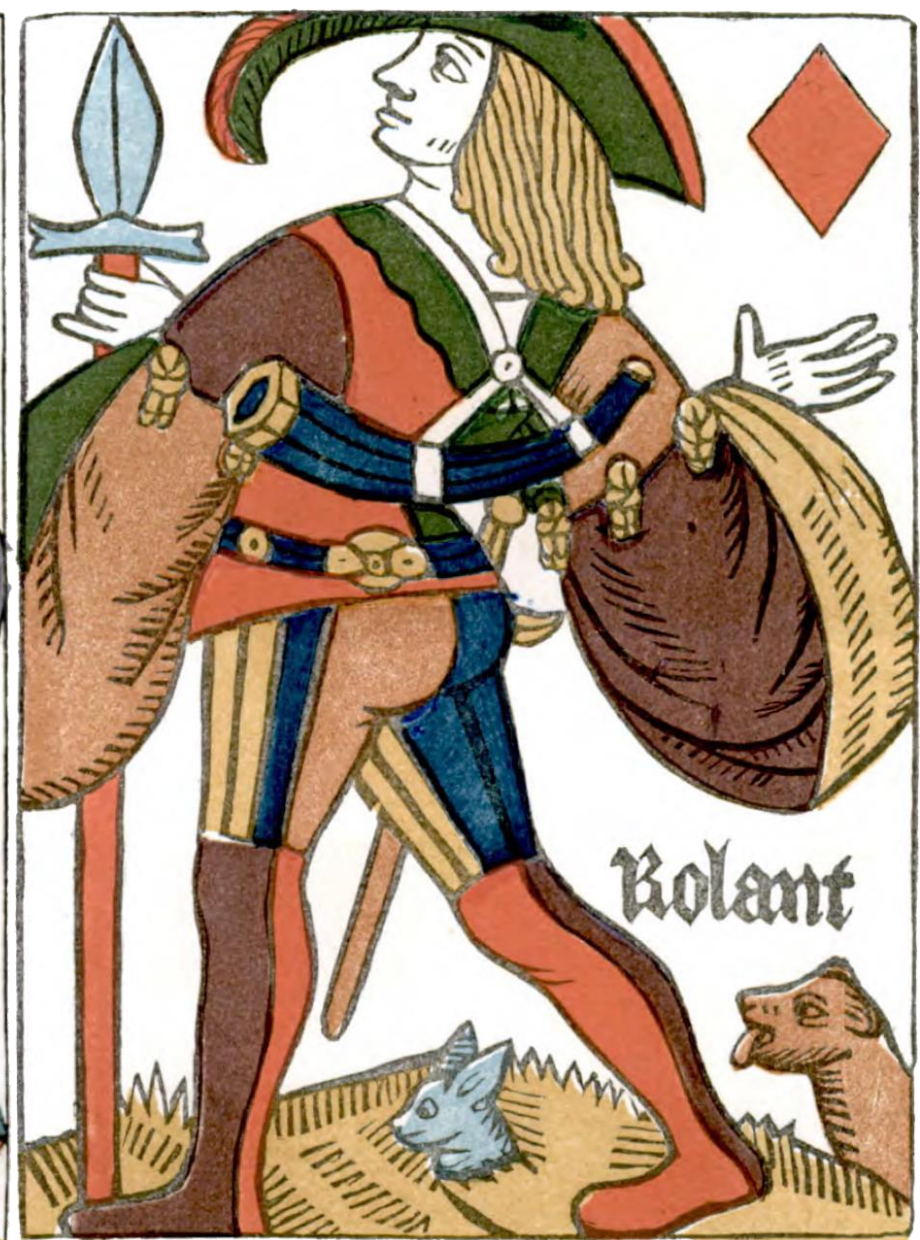
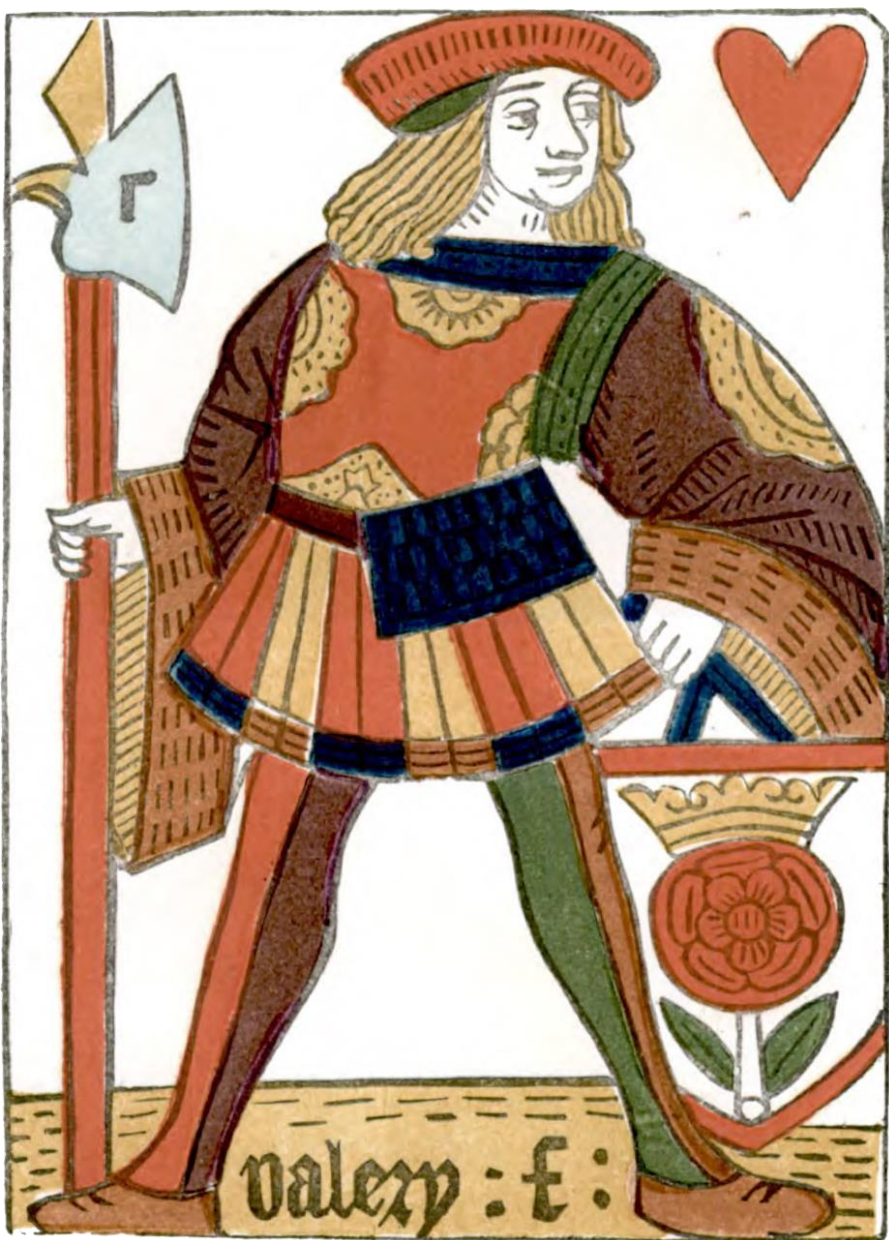
Diamonds



Clubs



Spades



Card Game Mechanics

Mechanic	Description	Example(s)
Outlay	Play a card from hand	
Exchange	Exchange cards with others or pool	
	Swap cards with others	Cuckoo, Chase the Ace
	Pass cards to others	Old Maid, Spoons
	Take cards from others	Go Fish, Quartets
Compare	Compare cards with others	
	Banking: compete against common source	Baccarat, Blackjack
	Vying: bet against other players and fold	Poker, Brag
	Showdown: compare hands with others	Bone Ace, Ging
Take Tricks	Win trick by playing one card in a round	Euchre, Hearts
Match	Form groups and combinations	Rummy, Mahjong
Accumulate	Take all the cards	War, Slapjack
Shed	Get rid of all your cards	Crazy Eights, Speed
Fish	Capture cards from a common pool	Cassino, Scopa
Draw and Discard	Draw one card, discard another	Canasta, Golf

Challenge

Play 1 or more of the example games to test out different card game mechanics.

References

Chatto, William Andrew. *Facts and Speculations on the Origin and History of Playing Cards*. London: John Russell Smith, 1848.

Wilkinson, W. H. "Chinese Origin of Playing Cards." *The American Anthropologist* 8 (1895), 61-78.