THE CONTINENTAL TAROTS

by Christine Payne-Towler

In the essay titled "The Major Arcana" I emphasize that "something happened" to the Tarot in the late 1600s, when a new trend emerged in the images of the Major Arcana. I point to the Marseilles family of decks and the Etteilla Tarots to illustrate my point. The images shown by Antoine Court de Gebelin in his book Le Monde Primitif further validates this idea. The remainder of this essay is about exploring "what happened."

Let's review the situation of Tarot in the first half of the 1600s. Since the early 1400s, both handmade and woodblock Tarots showed a remarkable constancy of internal structure even though some packs were either edited or expanded to meet the needs of the various games for which they were created. Tarot appeared in 72-card form in Italy around 1450, although this model may representsc"splice" between preexisting symbol sets: the twenty-two Hebrew alphabet-keyed set called the Major Arcana, and the Turkish Mamluk cards of unknown provenance, a 15th century version of which can be seen in volume 2 of Stuart Kaplan's Encyclopedia of Tarot(see essay on the Minor Arcana).

Kaplan also explains that the numerical order the Arcana appear in now is carried over from the French pack by Catelin Geofroy, published in 1557 (Vol. 1, p. 65). Some earlier fragmentary Tarots show Roman numerals on some of their Major Arcana, but not all of them, and not in the order we are now familiar with. Those very old woodblock decks tend instead to follow the list enumerated in a sermon written by an Italian friar in the late 15th century (see illustration opposite page 1 in Volume 1 of Kaplan's Encyclopedia of Tarot). There is also another order derived from the Charles VI pack that keeps Temperence, Fortitude and Justice together in a group. A very small minority of Tarots follow this order, including Etteilla’s Tarots.

Many of the earliest decks did not show either Roman or Arabic numerals, titles or astrology sigils. Some of the images do, however, utilize traditional scenes and characters from the signs of the zodiac, the personae of the planets and other traditional mythic themes familiar to the culture of the times.

A look at these oldest packs reveals images from the persecuted Cathar movement as well as Hebrew, Greek and Gypsy occult symbolism. The vehemence with which the Church attacked the cards and their makers only reinforces the evidence that Tarot was the repository of heretical wisdom preserved in imagery. Close study of the excellent book called Tarot Symbolism by Robert O’Neil exposes the falsity of the belief that there were no esoteric associations with Tarot imagery before Eliphas Levi.

The Marseilles family of Tarots began to appear in the late 1400s or early 1500s, slowly evolving and becoming more distinct as versions were reproduced and a their popularity spread. The deck we are featuring from this family is based on the classical Italian-Piedmontese tarot of Giusep Ottone, first published in1736. Dr. Lewis Keizer considers this family of decks to be the best reproduction of the earliest Arcana to have survived the Inquisition (see "The Esoteric Origins of Tarot: More than a Wicked Pack of Cards").

O’Neil suggests that the Marseilles Tarots were actually the original "folk" pattern, but since most copies were woodblock-print "catchpenny" decks, not expensive works of art like the handmade decks of the Milanese ducal families, they more easily became worn and were discarded and replaced. (I agree to the extent that I too think the earliest extant Tarots are probably not true to the sources that originally inspired Tarot.) This helps explain the uniqueness of the Visconti Sforza and related Tarots, which have more in common with the Mantegna Tarots that the Marseilles.

Most of the differences from one pack of Marseilles Tarots to another were simply local details entered into the standard image to identify the maker and the region in which the given version was produced. But in the early 1660s, two decks appeared that permanently changed the look of several Major Arcana. Subsequently, those changes "leaped out" of the Marseilles mold, appearing in the works of de Gebelin and all the Etteilla variants of the following century, effectively obliterating the older versions of these cards except in the case of a nostalgic few Tarot makers who preferred the archaic form. The two Marseilles-style decks that date this telling change in the Tarot canon are the Tarots by Jacques Vieville and Jean Noblet, both Parisian cardmakers in the Marseilles tradition.

A Glance At the Cards in Question

Two defining characteristics of the oldest Tarots were a Lovers card that shows "The Union of the King and Queen" theme, and a Devil card that shows the image of a traditional werewolf or lamia from European pagan antiquity. After the change in the late 1600s, those two cards are drawn to entirely different models, called the Two Paths and Typhon (or later Baphomet). These amendments to the Arcana can first be seen in the aforementioned two French Marseilles Tarots which appeared in the early 1660s. A century later these same amendments appeared as illustrations in Le Monde Primitif by Court de Gebelin, and Etteila’s Tarot also followed them faithfully. By the beginning of the 19th century, all schools of Tarot used the "new" models despite their other differences. Adjustments were made at the same time to several other Major Arcana, but the Lovers and the Devil serve as perfect "markers" in Tarots that accepted this new influence.

In Volume 2 of Stuart Kaplan’s Encyclopedia, we have an excellent illustration of the development of these two "new" Arcana as they appeared in 1660 in Jacques Vieville and Jean Noblet’s decks. Kaplan was kind enough to put them on opposite pages, and we can actually see the ideas developing. Apparently Vieville liked the new version of the Lovers, but rejected changes to the Devil, while Jean Noblet went all the way and changed them both. It is uncanny how they form the line of demarcation--before them, only the old forms appear, but after them, entirely new images take over. It's hard not to wonder "what happened here?"

Introducing Athanasius Kircher

One way to answer the above question would be to ask the parallel question, "What else was happening in Europe during the second half of the 1600s that might cause a ripple of change in the Tarot?" This question is easier to answer. In a general way the answer is "the closing years of the Renaissance." But the more specific answer, very relevant to Tarot, is "Athanasius Kircher." One has only to find a copy of Joscelyn Godwin's wonderful presentation Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for

Lost Knowledgefrom Thames and Hudson to realize that this German Jesuit scholar is a key to many riddles in the history of esoteric Tarot.

In the essay "Kabbalah/Cabbalah," an entire section is devoted to Kircher's Christian Cabbalah paradigm. It is he who adapted the paths of the Tree of Life into the form that modern magicians and Tarot practitioners are familiar with. It is also Kircher who was so convinced of the Egyptian source of the ancient mysteries, and so learned and literate in the exposition of his ideas, that the sheer force of his certainty impregnated esoteric thought for centuries afterward. And I think it is he who, either directly or indirectly, affected the look of the Tarot forever after.

As you gaze upon his illustration of Pan or Jupiter, it is difficult to miss how closely the "new" Devil image that appears in the 1660s resembles Kircher's conception. A shift in gender in evidence by Levi's time (late 1880’s), in which the Devil gravitates from a masculine form, through a form with attributes of both genders, to the final female form, gives us the Baphomet image favored in the esoteric schools all over Europe. (see chapter on The Major Arcana) If we accept this resemblance as relevant to the changing of the Devil cards of Tarot, then we can see the process by which we might find evidence in Kircher's work or that of his contemporaries for the shift in the Lovers card, and possibly other details as well. Unfortunately, my catalog of Kircher's work is not extensive enough to let me point to such a striking parallel image in the case of the Lovers. But even partial exposure to his ideas and images serves to convince us that Kircher’s voracious mind made itself an expert on whatever it contemplated.

Meanwhile, the article by Dr. Keizer points to the mid-1700s as a pivotal time in the history of Tarot, because that is the time of the Fratres Lucis or Brothers of Light. In essence, Dr. Keizer says that the books published by de Gebelin and Etteilla, lauding the Egyptian origin of the Tarot Arcana, were not original in their ideas at all, but were "already common understanding in French occult circles, which were essentially Freemasonic" (p. 12). Keizer sets forth that the "Egyptian Initiation" manuscript that was translated and published by Paul Christian (aka Jean Baptiste Pitois) in 1870 is actually a Fratres Lucis initiatory document from before the French Revolution (which started in 1789). Keizer does not say at which point the Fratres Lucis got the document or when the images were created for it. Upon exmining the book Dr. Keizer refers us to, called Egyptian Mysteries, anonymously published by Weiser in 1988, we find in its foreword “... Egyptian Mysterieswas probably translated into French by Christian,though not from the original manuscript....but from a handwritten copy, many of which had been circulating in the occult world from the Middle Ages up to the 19th century.”(italics the author’s.)

These ideas in mind, we can now see a theme emerging: In the late Renaissance Kircher amalgamates the Ari version of the Sephir Yetzirah with the Pythagorean astro-alphanumeric code, and the basis for Christian Cabbalah is born. Kircher may have also been exposed to the Fratres Lucis document, which by then was available to occultists in Europe, and which also reflects the Hermetic asto-alphanumeric varient. He declares in no uncertain terms that the entire occult canon of the Renaissance comes from Egypt. The stream of Marseilles Tarots shows sudden and characteristic changes that could easily reflect the mammoth catalog of sacred art Kircher both created and commissioned.

The Freemasonic community either picked up or were bequeathed Kircher's works, stimulating the enhancement of the already existing Gnosticinflected folk Tarot with his fabulous and extremely occult images. Secret initiatory documents would then have been created to further illuminate the teachings contained in the images. Court de Gebelin and Etteilla (both Freemasons) each publicized the story of the Egyptian origin of the Arcana just as Kircher asserted it. However, the resulting initiatory document, which became associated with the Fratres Lucis by the time of the French Revolution, was not revealed publicly until 1870, by Paul Christian.

Meanwhile, the descriptions of the Arcana in that manuscript match exactly the changes which appear spontaneously in the Marseilles family of Tarots during the first half of the 1660s. I draw the conclusion that the inspiration for those changes is to be found in the Fratres Lucis manuscript, traveling through the underground stream of the Secret Societies.. And if Kircher himself did not have a hand in mirroring the Fratres Lucis images into the Major Arcana of Tarot, then the Rosicrucian and Masonic community who followed in his immediate footsteps did.

Tarot historians have never seen the original models for the changes that appear in the Vieville and Noblet Tarots, but that may be just because we are not studying athe Renaissance magi carefully enough. The telling fact that the images first appeared on Tarot cards two centuries before Paul Christian's publication of the Fratres Lucis document means that we have to reevaluate the current theory that the "Egyptian-style images" on some Tarots are late developments in Tarot art.

The very first of these Egyptian-style Tarots to emerge after Christian's publication was the Falconnier/Wegener Tarot of 1896. Gareth Knight, in his fascinating book The Treasure House of Images, tells us “Designs for the Falconnier Tarot were taken from originalfrescos and bas-reliefs in the Louvre and the

British Museum, but they nonetheless retain a very French flavour” (p. 20) In the article written about this deck in Volume 2 of the Encyclopedia, Kaplan says "Interestingly, he [Falconnier] cites the 1760 Tarot of Marseilles by N. Conver [see Vol. 1 of the Encyclopedia] as one that is closest to the 'traditional' Tarot." Perhaps now we can understand why Falconnier would make such a comment!

The catalog of Egyptian-style Tarots, matching the Fratres Lucis manuscript, also includes the Papus Tarot, the St. Germaine Tarot, the Ibis, the Brotherhood of Light Tarot, Egypcios Kier, Tarot of the Ages and a few others. Thee information accompanying these Tarots all create the impression that their images come to us from sources far anterior the first historical decks of the 1400s, and yet each shows the Two Paths and Baphomet rather than the earliest "European" images. We cannot prove such an early date as the origin of the manuscript or the images that have become associated with it. But it's clear that those who say it's "proven" that Pitois/Christian made that manuscript up for his book are simply not looking at the cards themselves.

Dr. Keizer also reminds us that the images that have become associated with the Fratres Lucis document might be influenced by the Isaian/Serapian cult that existed in Italy during Alexandrian times (until the 400s AD). The Italians were excavating and studying Serapian temples by the 10th century (see the essay "The Esoteric Origins of Tarot"). Kircher spent the later decades of his life in Italy, and was known as an omnivorous thinker and student of the world. Can we really imagine that he missed out on visiting one of those Serapis temples during his decades in Italy, when Egypt was his passion?

To summarize, although the temptation for modern historians has been to look at the pivotal 19th century and the work of Eliphas Levi asdefining the epoch of esoteric Tarot, upon closer examination, the situation is not so easy to characterize.

A Bit of Secret Society History

The term Secret Societies is used to refer to an underground affiliation of esotericists deemed heretical by the Catholic Church since the 1100s, made up of pagans, Jews, Arabs, Gnostics, Gypsies and other people of minority beliefs in Christian Europe. The Church’s abuses drovethem into each other’s arms over time, and by the earliest publication of Tarot there were sophisticated international organizations within which mystically and philosophically inclined people, including Christians of a tolerant ilk, could associate and cross-pollinate their ideas.

A particularly important group in the history of Tarot is the Rosicrucians (having their beginning in Germany in 1614), whose membership was always kept secret, and who were dedicated to keeping aspects of ancient wisdom alive despite the Catholic overthrow of pagan Europe. Over time the Rosicrucians created various Masonic Orders to serve as a doorway through which to attract new menbers. Masonry became tolerated as the only legitimate non-Christian "religion" in Catholic Europe, providing a haven of refuge for alternative thinkers who were spiritually inclined but would not bind themselves to the Pope and all he stood for.

The Order of Elect Cohens (established in the second half of the 1700’s by Martines de Pasqually) is the more recent origin of a lineage whose members have included many esoteric scholars pivotal to the history of Tarot, including Court de Gebelin and Etteilla. A century later, this lineage produced The Martinist Order, named after the philosophical stream of Martinez de Pasqually and Louis Claude de St. Martin and started by Papus in 1891.

So we can confidently assert that, from the time of Etteilla, the first to popularize a Tarot with overt esoteric content in the 1780s, virtually all the pivotal writers and makers of esoteric Tarot decks in Europe have been Secret Society members. It may prove true that the Tarot is itself a Secret Society creation, although the conditions of persecution under which it originated make that assertion difficult to either affirm or deny.

It is possible to find many books of Tarot "expertise" professing to recount the known history of Tarot but that entirely gloss over the Secret Society connections of the people who have been most pivotal in the history of Tarot. This results in a view of Tarot development with holes big enough to swallow an entire esoteric lineage! Thus I am infinitely grateful to have in my possession, due to a simple twist of fate, a three-volume restatement of the history of the European lodges, (called The Book of Rosicruciae, published in 1947) which puts an entirely different spin on the situation.

The author, E. Swynburne Clymer, also asserts that many of the people whose names areintertwined with the 18th and 19th century Tarots were members in the remarkable, multilayered web of connections linking the mystical intelligentsia of Europe. In his giant Book, he starts with the publication of the seminal document "Fama Fraternatis" in Germany, around 1614. From that event he moves forward in time with biographies of all the leaders through the generations who were willing to have their names go down in history (many more are mentioned, but anonymously).

I have been greatly enriched by reading the esoteric biographies of St. Germaine, Cagliostro, Stanislas de Guaita, Eliphas Levi and Gerard Encousse/Papus. All these names are familiar to students of Tarot, but the public record on these people is in some cases scant, in others distorted. Clymer's information has given me a less lopsided perception of these dedicated and cultivated persons. Although some have felt that Clymer is a less than unbiased source and therefore his word is not taken as gospel, we cannot correct his excesses or gain perspective on his contribution unless his work is republished in accessible form for all.

When I looked for confirmation of Clymer's excellent volumes, I found Isabel CooperOakley and her book The Count of SaintGermaine, (as derived from the Masonic Archives, with all sources cited). Cooper-Oakley affirms that a whole cohort of magical personalities--St. Germaine, St. Martin, Etteila, Mesmer, Cagliostro and others --collectively represented the French at the Masonic Convention in Paris in 1785 (see pages 108-9). By the end of the chapter she has supplemented that quote with similar remarks from other contemporary sources. As in the previous paragraphs, we are seeing the names of people who have featured heavily in the history of the Orders, in the history of occultism, and in the history of Tarot.

I find it fascinating to imagine just what the chemistry of those times and this group was like. Some of these people were tremendously controversial in their times, in particular St. Germaine and Cagliostro. It has piqued my interest that in this century, Tarots have emerged bearing the names of St. Germaine and Cagliostro. Subtle details on these Tarots point back to this exciting moment in history when Etteilla, Cagliostro, St. Germaine and their Brothers were fanning the flames of the Tarot revival begun in the previous century.