The Older Alexandrian Stream

In addition to the revolutionary reemergence of the Fratris Lucis-style images of the Devil and the Lovers (among others), the European Lodges also revived the traditional astro-alphanumeric correspondences of the Alexandrian Hermetic system set into place by Pythagoras around 600 BC and revived during the flowering of Alexandrian culture after 300 BC. These correspondences, slightly different from those given in the Sephir Yetzirah of the Jews, are the only other version of the letter/number/Arcana correspondences we can be sure are truly authentic and founded in antiquity. Etteila taught these correspondences in his books published in the late 1700s, but the correspondences printed on his decks are a blind. Levi made subtle modifications in the late 1800s, and all the European Rosicrucian and Masonic lodges used them, with the exception of the English, right up to the 20th century

Etteilla's Tarot became the most famous deck in Europe in the century after its inception. Its offshoot, the Catalan Tarot, became the first 78-card Tarot deck published in Spain in 1900, according to Fournier's playing card encyclopedia. Etteilla-style Tarots became more ornate in the 19th century (see Kaplan's Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 141-144 and Vol. 2, p. 400-410). A shortened version was also printed in France at fhe end of the 19th century to simplify it for fortune telling. In Italy, the 19th century Cartomancia was the homegrown response to Etteilla, and that Tarot has made it considerablly easier to unscramble which of Etteilla's images go with which Arcana of the usual Tarots, as both of the sources mentioned below have only partial information in their lists, and over two centuries of reprinting in various countries, the Etteilla cards began to show considerable corruption in the letter/astrology corresponcences, making a confusing situation even more difficult to unravel.

The two lists I am citing to detail Etteilla’s astroalphanumeric correspondences are the one given by Papus in the late 1800s, and Stuart Kaplan’s versopm in Vol I of his Encyclopedia. Athough I cannot read French to confirm those earlier connections, I know that Papus was the recognized expert of his time and was cited by all English, French and Spanish Tarot writers of his day. I trust his reporting, although his information only goes so far as to link Etteilla’s Arcana to the more usual versions from the Marseilles Arcana. Stuart Kaplan shows a differently organized version of the same set in his Encyclopedia of Tarot, Vol. 1, having taken the trouble to supply the astrology correspondences from Etteilla’s books. These correspondences became standard for all of Europe's Secret Societies and their Tarots by the time of Levi.

That would make Etteilla the harbinger of the late-appearing Egyptian-style decks, which include the Falconnier/ Wegener Tarot, its modern cognate the St. Germaine Tarot, the Ibis, the Egypcios Kier and the Brotherhood of Light Tarot. All these Tarots bear Egyptian-style images (which I stated earlier could be Serapianinspired, reflected through A. Kircher's synthetic genius). The texts of these decks reference, to a greater or lesser degree, the Fratres Lucis text translated and published by Paul Christian in his History of Magic.

Again, the numbers and signs printed on Etteilla's' cards exist in their own little universe, as they are purposefully rearranged compared to any previous Tarot ordering. This body of attributions is a blind. What is true to the Alexandrian stream are his astro-alpha-numerology connections.

Why Did Etteilla Modify the Major Arcana?

It seems that Etteilla was attempting to realign the images of the Major Arcana with a Greek creation story, a later, Alexandrian modification of the ancient Hebrew mythos of middle-eastern origin. Recent research shows that in changing the images of the Major Arcana, Etteilla was drawing from a Hermetic book, The Poimandres, a Greek treatise on the creation of the world and the fall of humanity into Eros. Essentially it's a Greek version of the Genesis story, but with differing names and an altered ordering of events. It fits the standard type of a hypostasis narrative.

The hypostasis is a detailed recitation of the stages that The Creator used to step down universal power so it can be organized into a time-space world peopled with creatures. The Kaballah Tree is one hypostasis narrative, evident when you follow the angles of the Lightning Bolt as it descends through the planetary Sephira into matter. Such presentations are a recognizable feature of a Mystery School format. This is the classic "how the world came to be" narrative (see A Wicked Pack of Cards by Dumett et. al.).

Etteilla's Tarot assimilated the seven days of creation theme directly from The Poimandres (or "Pymander"; there are several spellings). This is one of the manuscripts the Moors saved when it was taken from Alexandria in the sixth century. It was later returned to Europe in the 1500s. By so explicitly detailing a seven days of creation theme that is not the Judeo-Christian version, he is waving a red flag, stating without words that "this is not the folk Tarot that can be passed off as Catholic." Perhaps the workings of democratic groups like the Fratres Lucis emboldened him to tell his truth, if only in veiled form, and only in the pictures. In hindsight, he was getting away with a lot!

Along with referencing the Greek and Hermetic stream of Gnosis as the source of his Arcana, Etteilla also reintroduced certain themes that were present in the earliest handmade and woodblocked Tarots but which had been suppressed through the efforts of the Church. Etteilla put back the earliest Goddess images that had been replaced by male figures like Hercules (Strength), Mars (The Chariot), the Hanged Man (Prudence), not to mention any extra Popes and Emperors.

To my eye, Etteilla attempted to revive the more blatant representation of the Sophianic, Hebrew Goddess-based suppressed Gnostic and Holy Grail mythos so threatening to the Church five centuries earlier among the Cathars. Gershem Scholem asserts this very theme in many places in his excellent works--that the Gnostic religion of the Cathars was by no means a purely Christian phenomenon, but instead was imprinted by the Jewish Gnosticism fermenting locally at the same time. Remember, the earliest handmade Tarots (from the mid-1400s) prominently feature the Popess card as a woman in full ecclesiastical garb, intimately identified with the Cathar heresies. Perhaps by clothing these oldest Gnostic images in Hermetic garb, he hoped to cement the link between Alexandrian culture and Gnosticism in Tarot tradition. It is too bad that the layers of veiling he applied to his Arcana have obscured them for so long!

Etteilla also put the signs of the zodiac on his first twelve Arcana, although again following no previous traditional ordering system, but superimposing his own logic, then claiming it was from the Hebrew. However, as we have seen above, he was, in fact, working with the Hermetic/ Alexandrian variation, which dates back to the Pythagorean corrections to the Greek alphabet in the 7th century bc.

Reassessing Etteila’s Work

Elizabeth Cooper-Oakley's book The Count of St. Germaine names Etteilla as a compatriot to Masons and Martinists in his time. We also can see that he was using Kabbalistic correspondences that are in line with what we know of Pythagorean and Hermetic teachings. As well, his Tarots became the most popular and influential of the world's Tarots in the century following their publication. Why, then, do Tarot historians invariably skim over him so lightly? It is a measure of his success as a lodge member that the popular press has never seen the esoteric merit of these Tarots. "Hidden in plain sight," indeed!

It is more than likely that the Etteilla Tarot is the "blind" that the English writers from the early 20th century were warning students against getting caught up in. I can appreciate the thicket of considerations the Etteilla Tarot raises, appearing as it seems to, "out of the blue" and stealing the show so completely in its century that some scholars of his day feared Etteilla's Tarots would push out all the other decks on the market.

But if Papus and Kaplan are correct, and the similarities between Etteilla's Arcana images and the Fratres Lucis model are not accidental, it becomes clearer how important Etteilla's Tarot is for transmitting historical values, like a fly in amber, until we could finally decode them. His correspondences, both in the images and in the occult attributions, reach back to an ancient strata of magic, theurgy and mysticism refering us to Alexandrian sources rather than the older Judeo-Christian ones.

It is important to note that in the Arcana which Etteilla chose to rework to his own liking, he shows a high degree of literacy in the canon of magical art and the original Tarots. This suggests that the portrayal of Etteilla by exoteric history is another aspect of the "blind" around his Tarot. For all of Levi’s bluster about the imperfection of the Etteilla Tarots, it is no accident that a century later, Papus would borrow the entire framework for his own Minor Arcana from Etteilla!

One Century Later: Eliphas Levi

Returning to Secret Society lore, let us note that Clymer spares no pains in mentioning, among those rosters of illustrious lodge members and esoteric scholars, that Eliphas Levi was the Supreme Grand Master of the Fraternitas Rosae Crucis of Europe (with the exception of England) from 1856 until his death in 1875. This makes him a distinctly more interesting person than has yet been admitted by his translators or biographers. The public perception of this man and his life work would have one believe that his importance to the transmission of the esoteric paradigm was mostly in his own mind! Some modern Tarot scholars seem genuinely puzzled that he commanded such respect from the European intelligentsia of his day, a huge oversight in view of the facts as stated by Clymer.

Whatever aspersions have been cast by the dubious upon the name of Eliphas Levi, esoteric tradition reveals his steadying influence in the chaos which the Secret Societies were experiencing during his tenure as Supreme Grand Master. Not only did he serve as Grand Master for over twenty of the most difficult years the combined orders had faced in his century (the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War), but his name and writings were the turning point for esoteric Tarot, making it more accessible for the masses after the century of Etteilla's confusing tarots. Clymer also names him as a Kabbalistic and Magean Initiate, and a member of L'Ordre Du Lit.

The books for which Levi is most known appeared during his earliest years as the Grand Master. In them he indicated the Sephir Yetzirah, Pythagoras and Court de Gebelin (among others) as sources for the letter/Arcana/astrological codes and correspondences used within the Fraternitas (Levi's History of Magic, p. 76-7). In an article called "The Science of the Prophets" found in The Mysteries of Magic, a digest of Levi's writings translated by A. E. Waite (p. 275-288), Levi lays out his Hebrew letter/Arcana correspondences very clearly, with no ambiguity. If his attributions were spurious or mistaken, there was plenty of time for the world to critique his assertions when he was still alive. But no such controversy ever erupted, because these were the common correspondences all over Europe and had been so for over a century. Only after his death, upon the disposal of his papers and the translating of hisworks, did the efforts at revisionism begin.

Levi's Significant Contributions to Tarot

It is clear that Eliphas Levi's monumental scholarship and high status in the Secret Societies made it easier for his attributions to become the standard European pattern from the late 1900s until today. Yet a few Tarots continued to follow the older pattern represented by Etteilla. The switch is subtle, because nothing changes between the Hebrew letters, their numbers or their astrology. But Levi’s work and the decks that grew out of his work show the letter Tav on The World and Shin on The Fool. The element/planet correspondences with the letters stay the same, but the Arcana themselves switch places in the alphabet.

It is possible that while working with Charles Nodier and Jean Baptiste Pitois (aka Paul Christian) on the spoils of Napoleon’s sack of the Vatican, cataloging and translating manuscripts from disbanded heretical monasteries of earlier centuries, Levi discovered something that inspired him to make this adjustment. So far I have found nothing among his translated writings which explains this transposition.

In his introduction to Oswald Wirth’s insightful booklet Introduction to the Study of Tarot, Stuart Kaplan states that Wirth was following Levi in putting the Fool between Judgment and the World, while “in the Arabic sequence, The Fool was designated 22 or 0” (p. 9). This is the one and only time I have seen “the Arabic sequence” mentioned, but it suggests a period when the astro-alphanumeric correspondences were diverted to the Moslem libraries and there forgotten. After the waning of Alexandrian culture, they reappeared in Europe in the late 1600s to effect the “correction” that the Marseilles and Etteilla Tarots represent.

Levi’s work on the Vatican treasures stolen by Napoleon made him and his co-workers, Nodier and Pitois, privy to materials that had been out of circulation for centuries already, materials we would give our eyeteeth to see again today. Quite likely it was all very carefully arranged to enlist Levi and his student (Papus) when the time came to catalog it all— who else at that time would have known what they were looking at? With access to these remarkable papal treasures as well as to the archives of the Rosicrucian and Masonic societies they each belonged to, they were “insiders” in the most inside sense of the word! (This, by the way, shows one possible path the Fratres Lucis manuscript could have taken to reach Pitois/Christian, although it is certainly not the only possible way.)

We can now attribute to Levi the pattern of correspondences leading to the decks by Papus, Wirth and the one named after Cagliostro. The lion’s share of modern European esoteric Tarots seems to be informed by this style of connecting the letters to the Arcana, no matter whether or how they splice on the astrology after the fact.

Reinstating Levi

Eliphas Levi was not the only person to suffer postmortem redactions and come out looking significantly reduced in the translation. I believe an unwritten mandate within the Societies states that when a member comes out with a book, deck or course of training that is too power-packed with the real teachings, or if it looks like it might be misunderstood or misapplied, several generations of lodge members following after them will be assigned to disclaim them. Etteilla disclaims de Gebelin. Levi disclaims Etteilla. Levi’s Golden Dawn translators play havoc with him. Papus disclaims Christian/Pitois, and Waite repudiates them all.

This is all part of the ancient debate over how much of the inner teachings should be shared with the masses. Built into the Secret Society paradigm is the notion that “our group is privy to esoteric truths that others lack.” The Church was continually trying to infiltrate the Secret Societies and criminalize their activities, so Society members could not freely share their teachings even if they had wanted to. Many occultists were also scientists, mathematicians, doctors, inventors and the like who rightly feared that their experiments and inventions would fall into the hands of those who would exploit them materially without adequate moral or spiritual guidance. (This is exactly what has happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the rise of secular scholarship disconnected from religious frameworks and ethical considerations.)

So even those who were seen by Secret Society members as teaching the esoteric paradigm (Etteilla and Levi, for instance) felt they had to resort to a bit of obfuscation, retaining the innermost secrets for “those who had eyes to see.” Even though Levi states in public that he thinks of Etteilla’s Tarots as misguided and erroneous, in truth he is using the very same system, with only the slightest amendments. And neither he nor Etteilla were entirely truthful about where the attributions came from. We must try to keep this trend in mind when we see how disparaging the English Tarot writers were about Levi just forty or fifty years later (see “The English School”).

Interestingly enough, both Etteilla and Levi were educated occultists who would most likely have been exposed to whatever versions of esoteric correspondences were being taught and used in the widespread Secret Society groups of their respective times. Yet they chose not to specify that they were each representing the Alexandrian/Hermetic branch of the Hebrew tradition rather than the considerably older Semitic branch as originally tabulated in the Sephir Yetzirah.

In Conclusion

In light of the above, we can now define the Continental Tarot as comprised of a lineage of lodge brothers collectively committed to the survival of the Hermetic/Alexandrian Gnosis, already old and revered at the time of the founding of the Fraternitas. The first, handmade Tarots revealed the Hebrew/Cathar/Gnostic origins of the Arcana, but those Tarots were eventually either lost or misunderstood, resulting in the promulgation of mass-produced decks with little but folk meanings, taking the place of the original flash cards for the Mysteries (see “The Confluence of Ancient Systems”).

Kircher, the Fratres Lucis, Etteilla, Levi and other Tarot reformers eventually imprinted a more esoteric version of the ancient Arcana into the collective consciousness. This was largely an underground endeavor until Levi laid it out in a systematic way for the whole of the Fraternitas. We have seen that this stream of Tarots has formed the riverbed in which most modern European Tarots (not of the English stream) are flowing.

My meta-theory that underlies most of what I’m working with here is that the Rosicrucians, especially the Martinist Lodge, has made it their business to save and revive the Inner Tradition of Tarot. The Continental Esoteric Tarots perpetuate representations of the ancient Hermetic/Alexandrian Mysteries, of the earliest proto-Tarots, and of the secret documents from the Middle Ages. This is one reason for calling the nineteenth century the French Occult Revival. Most sources point to Levi as the figurehead, but the dates prove that he was coasting on the previous century’s momentum.

As mentioned earlier, the crowd that has followed Levi’s “adjusted” correspondences, from the late 1800s to this day, places the Tav on the World card, while the letter Shin is on the Fool (see the essay “The Confluence of Ancient Systems”). I think we can use this variation as another marker to show which Tarots were constructed by Fraternitas members after Levi and which were drawn from the Fratres Lucis document from the 1600s.

For further insight into the more recent esoteric decks that promote the assignment of Shin to the Fool, see Valentine Tomberg’s priceless Meditations on the Tarot. Tomberg tells us that this correspondence was given to him from a “Martinist-Templar-Rosicrucian” confederation he belonged to in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1920. The modern occult writer Mouni Sadhu uses a redrawing of Court de Gebelin’s images with Levi’s correspondences in his extraordinary manual, The Tarot. Irene Gad’s valuable Tarot and Individuation also teaches this arrangement. I hope that the publication of these essays within the Tarot Magic Cd-Rom will stimulate more scholarship to emerge on the European esoteric paradigm.