

The Book of Formation (Sefer Yetzirah)



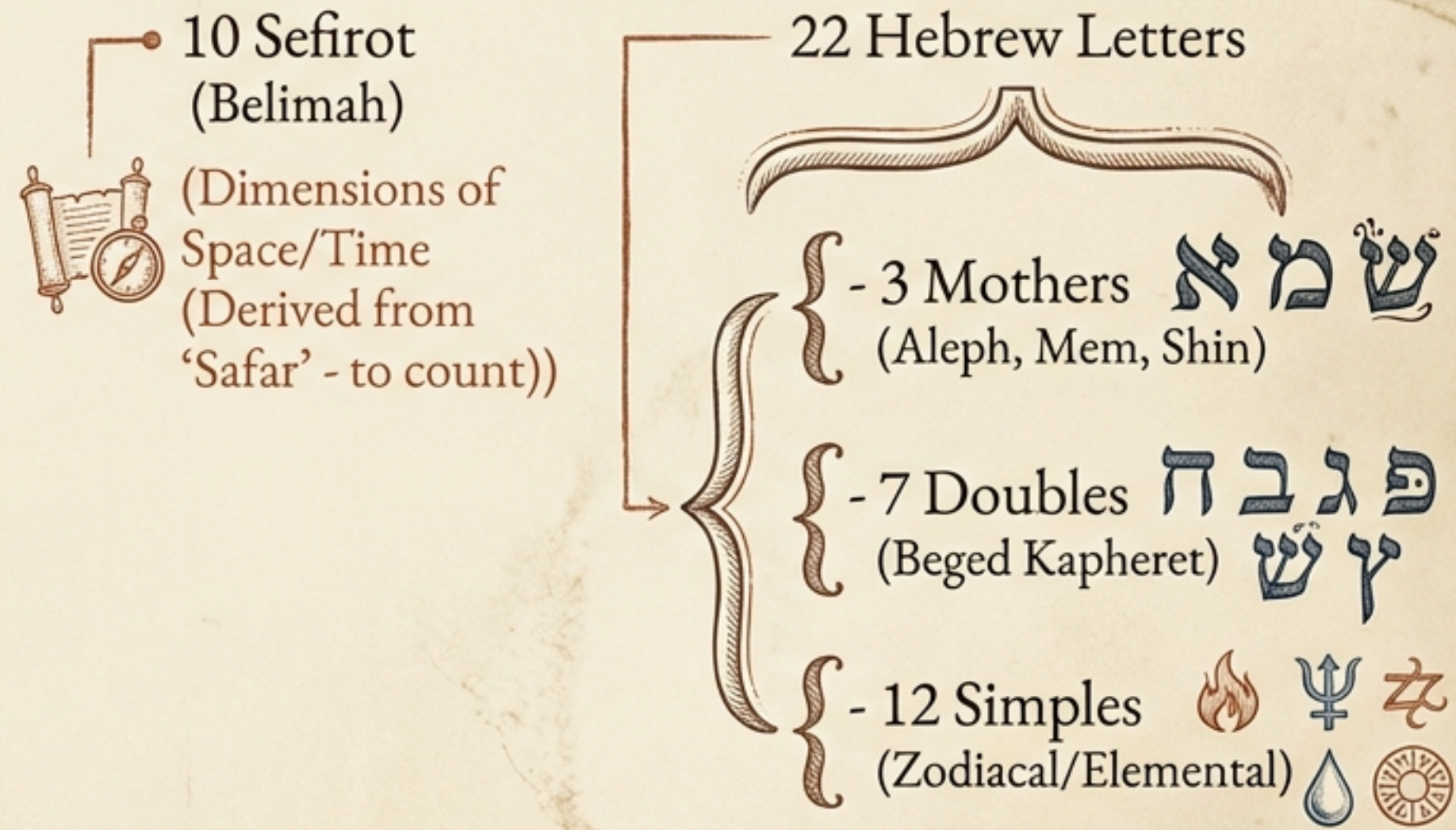
A Scholarly Introduction to the Origins of Jewish Speculative Tradition

The oldest extant Hebrew speculative treatise.

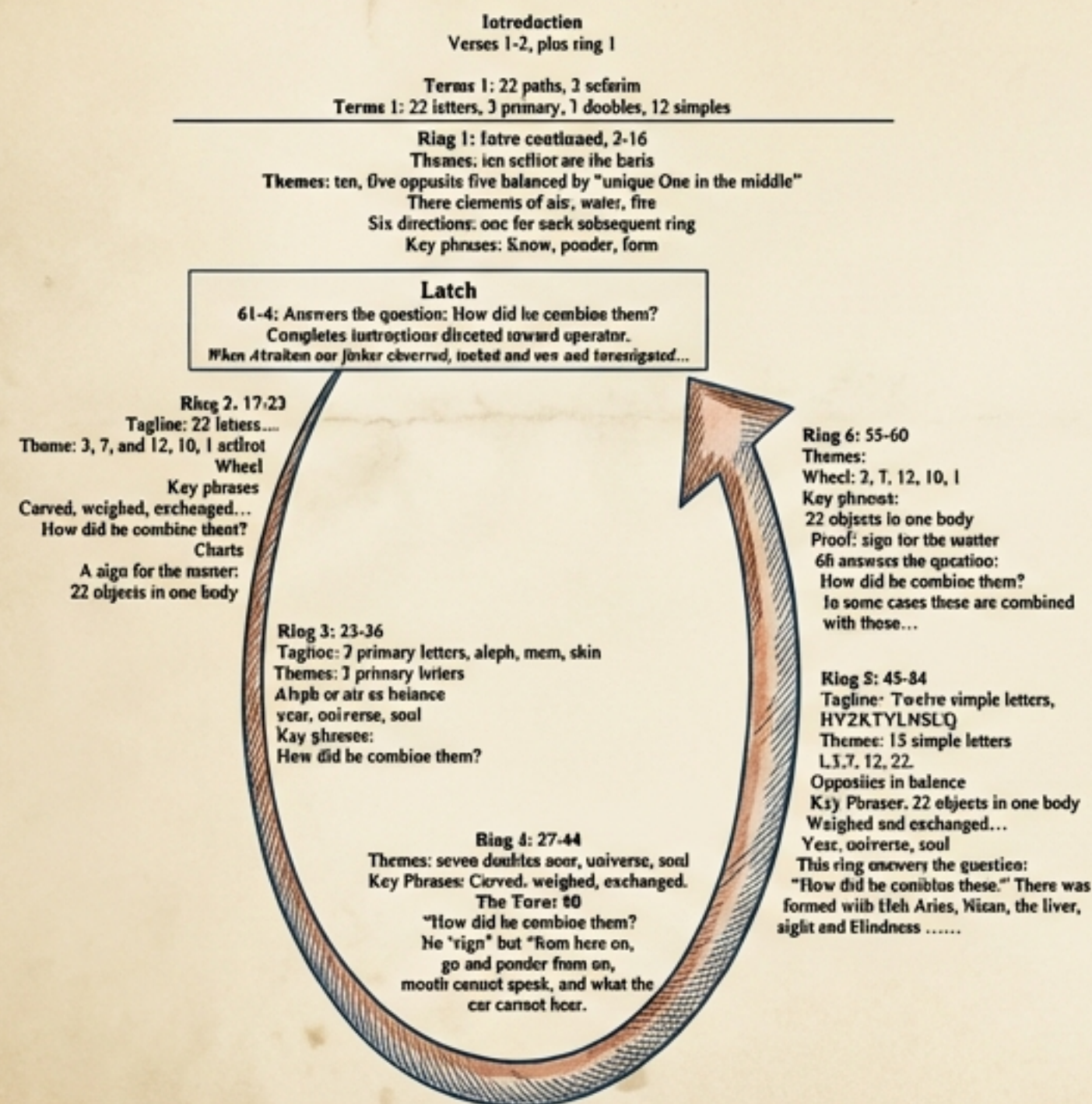
The Enigma in 2,000 Words

A laconic, cryptic treatise of fewer than 2,500 words. Without context or clear authorship, it posits that the cosmos is linguistic — reality is from the grammar of the divine language.

32 Paths of Wisdom



Structure as Argument: The Ring Composition



Marla Segol argues the text is a "mimetic" structure—its form imitates the circular cosmos it describes.

The text oscillates between two imperatives:

- The Descriptive:** "How did He combine them?" (Divine Creation)
- The Prescriptive:** "Go and calculate" (Human Application)

Logic: The circular structure has no beginning or end, mirroring the Sefirot: "Their end is imbedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end."

The Chronological Debate: When Was It Written?

2nd–6th Century:
The Early View

7th Century:
The New Consensus (Weiss)

9th Century:
The Revisionist View
(Wasserstrom)



Mishnaic Period.
Attributed to R. Akiva. Ties
to Talmudic linguistic style.

Syriac-Christian Context.
Pre-Islamic. Originating
far from Rabbinic centers.

Islamic Milieu.
Abbasid period. Parallels
with Islamic Kalam.

Contextual Clues: The Problem of *Hilkhhot Yetzirah*



ימותנויות צירבליה

The Talmud describes Rava creating a man and sages creating a calf using "Hilkhhot Yetzirah" (Laws of Creation)



Sanhedrin 65b

The Talmud describes Rava creating a man and sages creating a calf using "Hilkhhot Yetzirah" (Laws of Creation). Is this the Sefer Yetzirah? Early mystics said yes; modern scholars suggest Hilkhhot was an oral magical tradition later conflated with the book.

ימותנויות צירבליה

לחנותה מפרוקי פרוצסו אנוד יום וטעמיהם ספמטשועים מסודר דנידע חושדו נועים לשך טל שמוטעו דזשפטיים קיפסות

שיטתו טייטטו חסתי זשחר קטטו קודיע יש יהוין

שיטה אחר סולפיס תחילתו בודת דולם תיא היטת קוח חסין טעוובס תאפיס שדת

וְאֵלֵּי אֶפֶל לְאֵלֵּי
 מְשׁוֹר רַעֲנַת רַמָּךְ
 יִנְאִיחַ אֶרְפֹּךְ בְּךָ וְלֹ
 מְסָרִינוּ וְלִחְמָא רִיל
 הַעֲחִין עֶבֶר בְּכוֹת
 מְשִׁיךְ הַמָּה

Linguistics

The text lacks Greek or Arabic loanwords, suggesting antiquity. However, it shares conceptual DNA with late-antique Neo-Platonism.

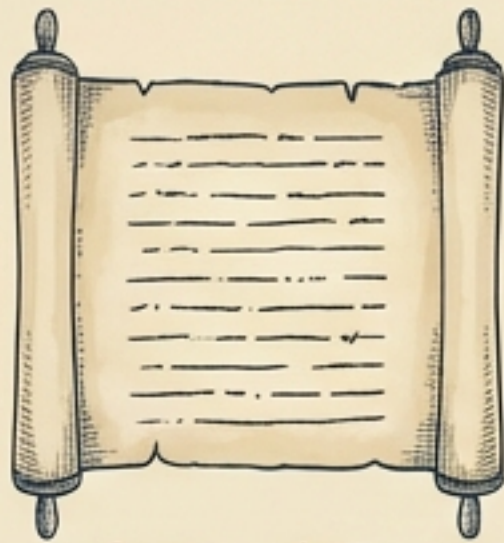
הכינוי לל רימיו טה וילוס ש לון עייח רכל מירדלי ג המויע תרדדכיכ

פיסריוד ל א ליל מירדלכל רדרת קי כיהש ולי עי ררלנ טש אצאת רייה

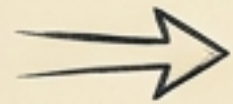
Re-evaluating the Recensions: A Scholarly Turn

BEFORE AND AFTER: A PARADIGM SHIFT

The Old Consensus



Original Text

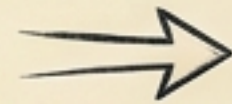


Saadian Version
Corruption/Late Edit

The New Insight (Avishai Bar-Asher)



Genizah Fragments



Oldest Structural Form

Recent Genizah research suggests the 'Saadian' version (Earliest Genizah-Attested Version) may preserve the original structure. The familiar 'Short' and 'Long' versions are likely later reorganizations.

הבנו לל רייוני טה מילוס לש זוג עייח רכל מירדלי ע המיוע תרדדיכ

הבנו לל רייוני טה מילוס לש זוג עייח רכל מירדלי ע המיוע תרדדיכ

The Scientific Phase: Saadia Gaon (931 CE)



Agenda:

Reconcile SY with "Creatio ex Nihilo" and rational philosophy.

• Re-interpretation:

- The Letters are not magical powers but 'agents' of creation.
- The text is a treatise on grammar and cosmology, not a spellbook.

- **Method:** Explaining away "magic" as allegory for natural processes, prioritizing logic and Islamic Kalam.

The Empirical Mystic: Shabbetai Donnolo

הבנו לל רייתו עה מלוט ל ס זוק עייה רכל מיהדל יע רכוינע תרדדזכ

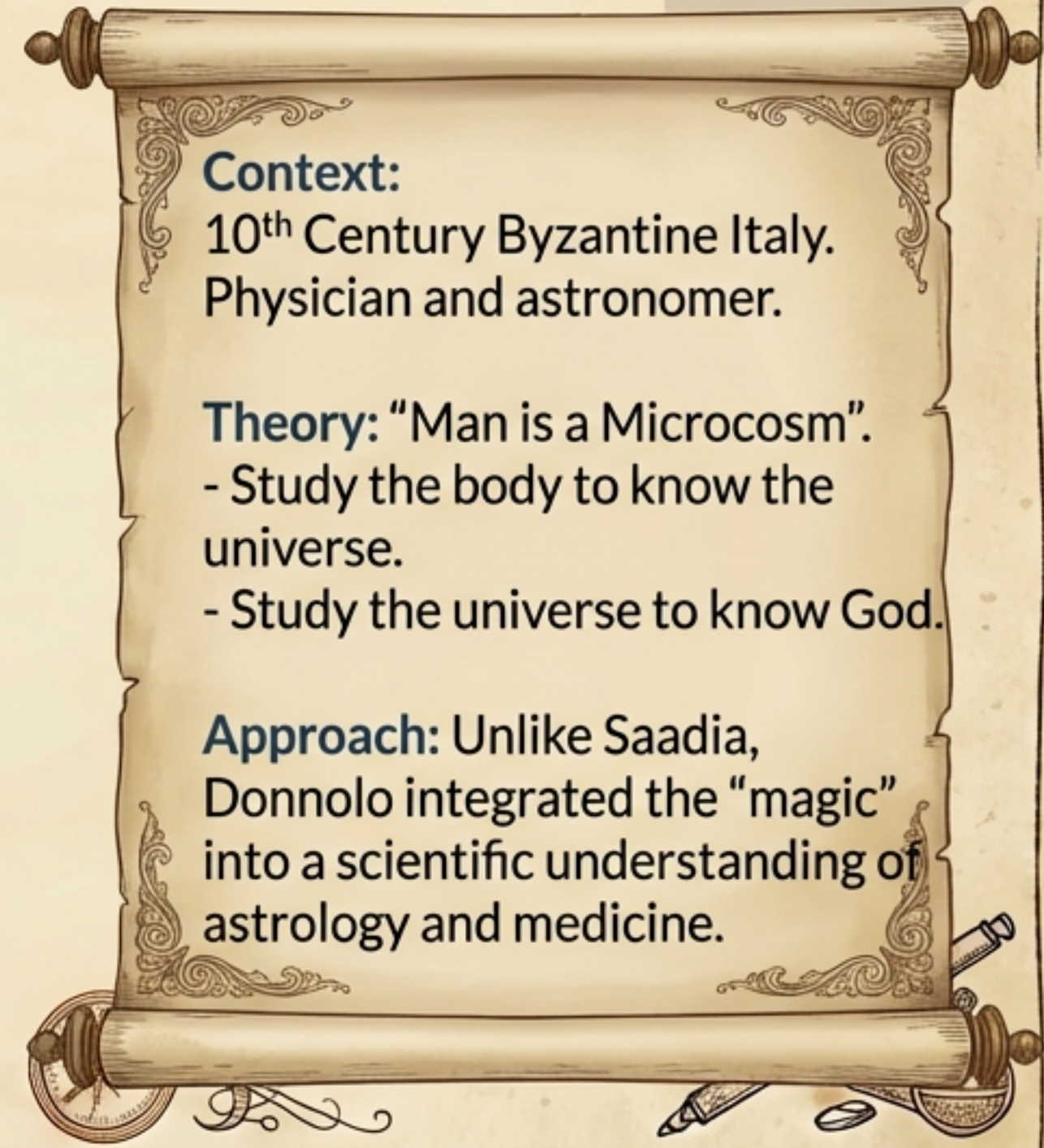
הבנו לל רייתו עה מלוט ל ס זוק עייה רכל מיהדל יע רכוינע תרדדזכ



Study the body to know the universe.

MICROCOSM:
The Human Body

Study the universe to know **God**.



Context:
10th Century Byzantine Italy.
Physician and astronomer.

Theory: "Man is a Microcosm".
- Study the body to know the universe.
- Study the universe to know God.

Approach: Unlike Saadia, Donnolo integrated the "magic" into a scientific understanding of astrology and medicine.

From Knowledge to Power: The Magical Turn



Context:

12th-13th Century Ashkenazi Hasidim (Eleazar of Worms).

• The Shift:

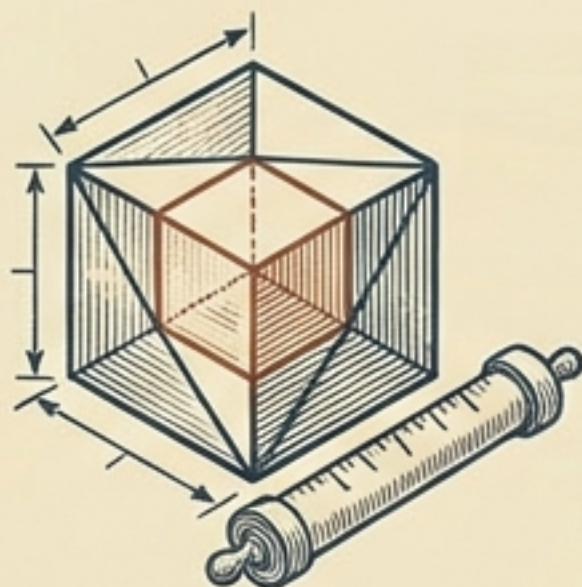
From philosophical understanding to '*Imitatio Dei*'—imitating God's creative act.

• The Golem:

- Commentaries provided recipes for creating artificial life.
- **Technique:** Reciting letter permutations over dust/clay.
- **Goal:** Ritual demonstration of mastery over the creative power of the Hebrew alphabet.

The Theosophical Turn: The Birth of Kabbalah

In Sefer Yetzirah



Numbers, Counting, Physical Dimensions
(Depth of Up, Depth of Down).



In Kabbalah (12th C.)



Divine Emanations, Aspects of
God's Personality.

Key Figures: Isaac the Blind and *The Bahir*. They re-read the text through a Neoplatonic lens, turning a map of the cosmos into a map of the Godhead.

הגבנו לל / ריגיותי עה מלוט - ס זוק עייה רבר מיהדלל ע רכיוניע תדלדלכ

הגבנו לל / ריגיותי עה מלוט - ס זוק עייה רבר מיהדלל ע רכיוניע תדלדלכ

Visualizing the Ineffable: The Diagram Tradition



Diagrams were “technology for conveying information” the text could not hold (Segol).

- **Types:**
 - **Ilanot (Trees):** Mapping Sefirotic hierarchy.
 - **Wheels/Circles:** Mapping letter permutations and cyclical time.
- **Significance:** These images acted as emissaries for the esoteric tradition.

The River of Interpretation



Philosophy
(Saadia)

Rational
Cosmology.

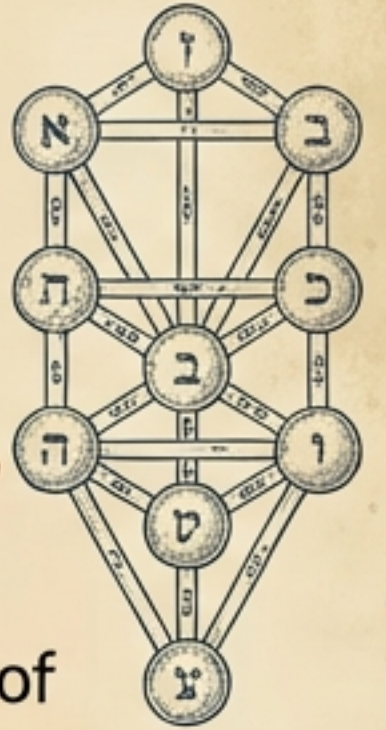
Magic
(Ashkenaz)

Manual for
Golem-Making.



Theosophy
(Kabbalah)

Map of
Divine Structure.



The "World-Absorbing Text": Its brevity allowed it to absorb the worldview of every reader, becoming a book about the grammar of reality itself.

הגבנו לל / המית' עה מלוט - ס זוג עייה רבר מיהדלל / ע רבוי' ע' תדלדלכ

הגבנו לל / המית' עה מלוט - ס זוג עייה רבר מיהדלל / ע רבוי' ע' תדלדלכ

הג'נו' ל'ל' / ר'מ'י'ת' ע'ה' מ'ל'י'ט' ל'ס' ז'ו'י'ן' ע'י'ת' ר'פ'ר' מ'י'ח'ד'ל' ע' ר'ב'י'ו'ש'ת' ת'ד'ר'ד'י'ב'כ'

ר'מ'י'ת' ע'ה' מ'ל'י'ט' ל'ס' ז'ו'י'ן' ע'י'ת' ר'פ'ר' מ'י'ח'ד'ל' ע' ר'ב'י'ו'ש'ת' ת'ד'ר'ד'י'ב'כ'

Sources & Further Reading

- Avishai Bar-Asher: The Earliest Version of *Sefer Yesirah* (2023)
- Peter Hayman: *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (2004)
- Raphael Jospe: Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yezirah* (1990)
- Marla Segol: Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah (2012)
- Steven M. Wasserstrom: *Sefer Yesira and Early Islam* (1994)
- Tzahi Weiss: *Sefer Yesirah and its Contexts* (2018)

THE CUBIC TEMPLE OF THE MIND

A Brunian Reading of the *Sefer Yetzirah* as Cognitive Architecture



The Sefer Yetzirah is a manual for the construction of a 'Holy Temple' within the psyche. By integrating the spatial logic of ancient Jewish mysticism with the mnemonic mechanics of Giordano Bruno, we convert the text into a tool: a 'Cosmographic Memory Palace' designed to orient the consciousness and bind the imagination.

THE BLUEPRINT FOR A HEROIC PSYCHOLOGY



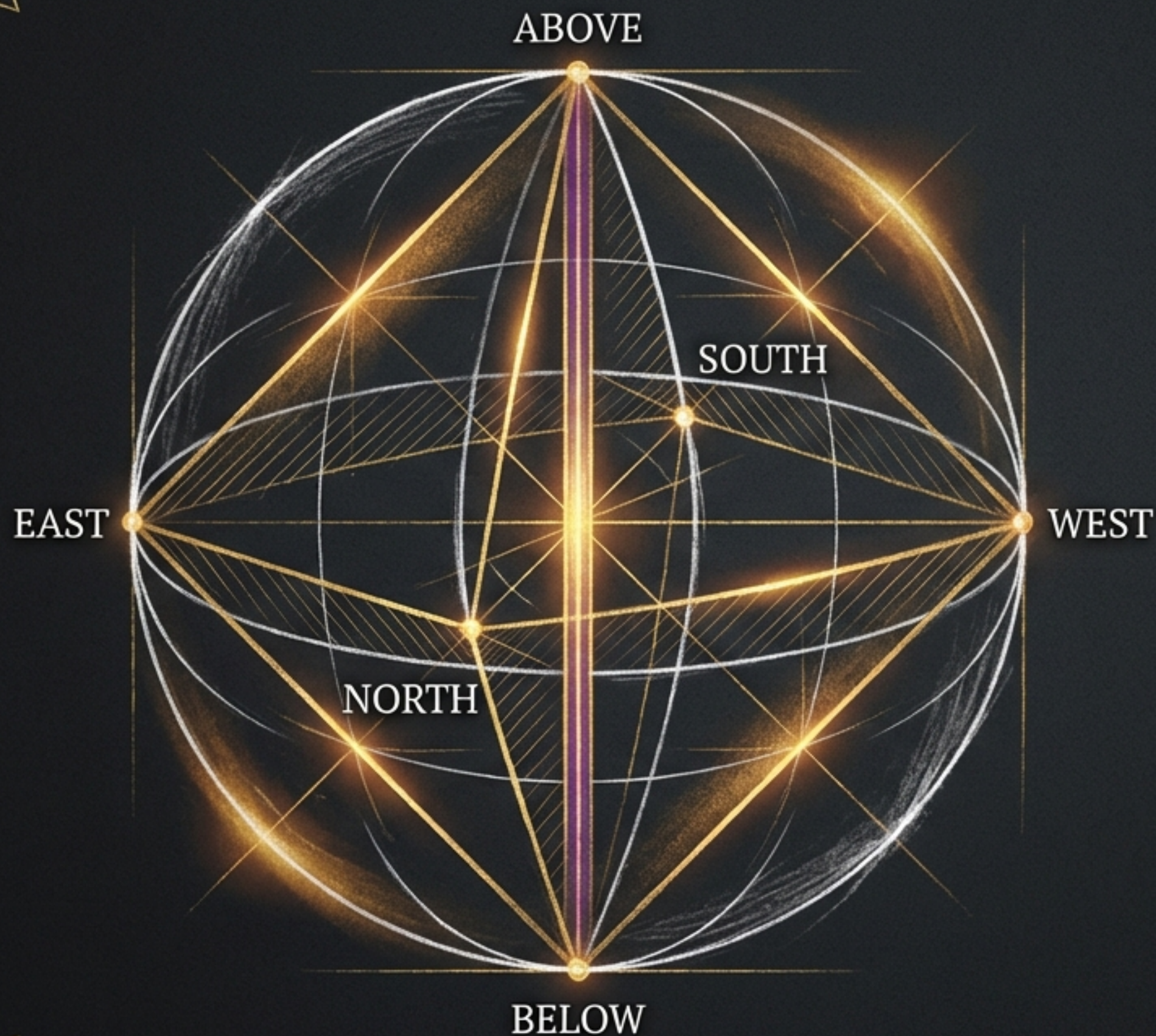
THE UNTRAINED MIND

Core Argument: Bruno did not view magic as supernatural sorcery, but as a "Heroic" psychology. To know the universe, one must reflect it internally. The Sefer Yetzirah provides the grid; Bruno provides the operating system.



THE ORDERED TEMPLE

Mertens: "Magic and mnemonics are intricated." The goal is to imprint "archetypal images" on the mind to reflect the macrocosm.
Segol: Mystical diagrams are "tools for orienting" and "doing." They are cognitive maps that allow us to navigate the invisible landscape of the mind.



FRAMING THE PALACE: THE OCTAHEDRON

The Sefer Yetzirah describes the universe as a structure of six dimensions expanding from a center.

"And the Holy Temple precisely in the center and it supports them all' (SY 4:4).

Key Insight: This 'Temple' is the Heichal (Palace), represented geometrically as an Octahedron defined by 6 vertices (The Depths) and 12 edges (The Boundaries). In our memory art, the 'Holy Temple' (Tifaret) is the Observer's vantage point—the container for all subsequent data.

THE ENGINE: THE 231 GATES AS COMBINATORIAL WHEELS

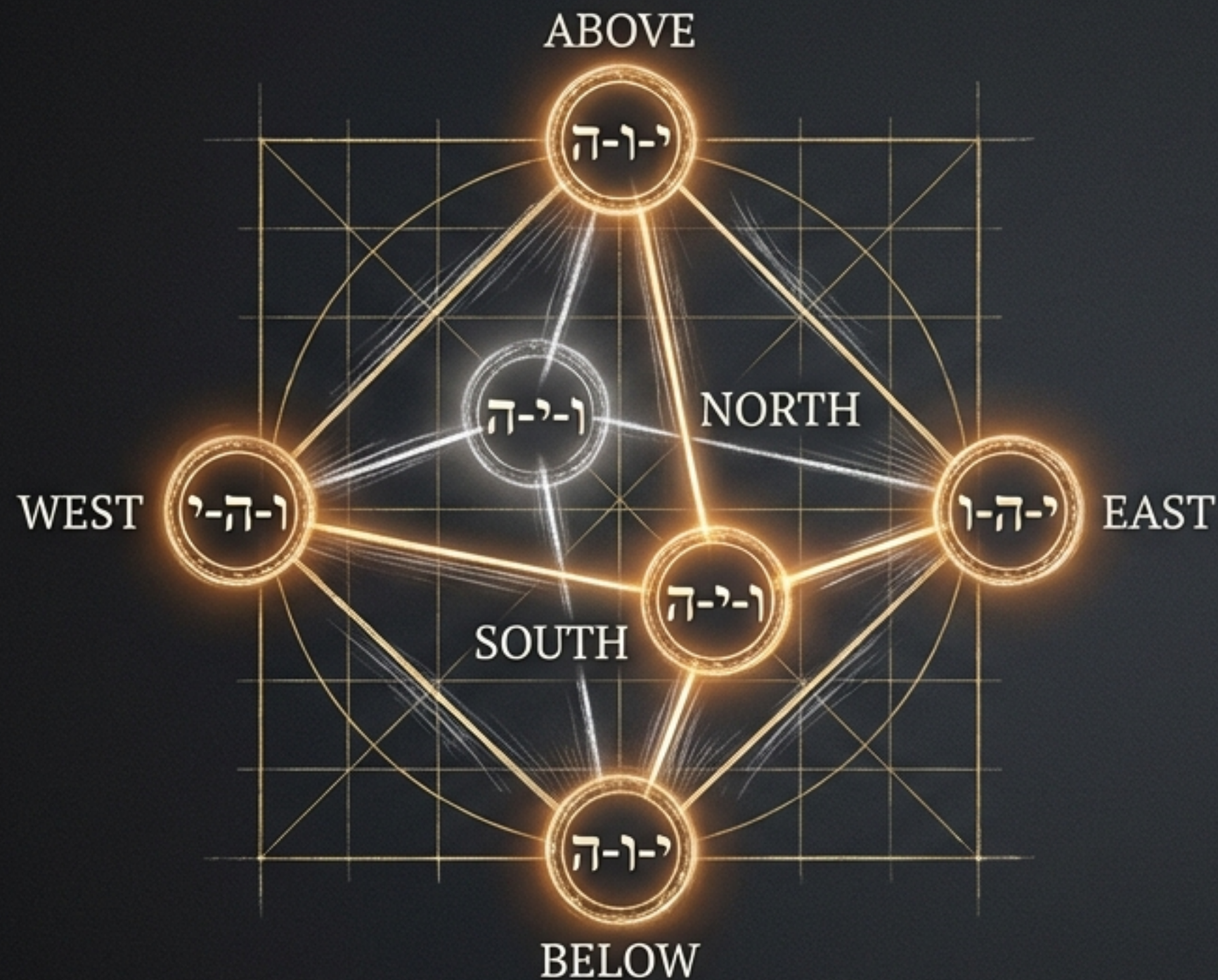


The Mechanism: The SY does not just place letters; it rotates them. "Aleph with all, and all with Aleph; Bet with all, and all with Bet" (SY 2:5).

Brunian Integration: This combinatorial logic mirrors Giordano Bruno's rotae (wheels). By placing the alphabet on a rotating inner wheel against a static outer wheel, the practitioner can generate 231 unique "Gates" or combinations.

Use Case: This allows the mnemonist to combine archetypal concepts (e.g., "Wisdom" + "Mars") to generate new insights, preventing memory from becoming static storage.

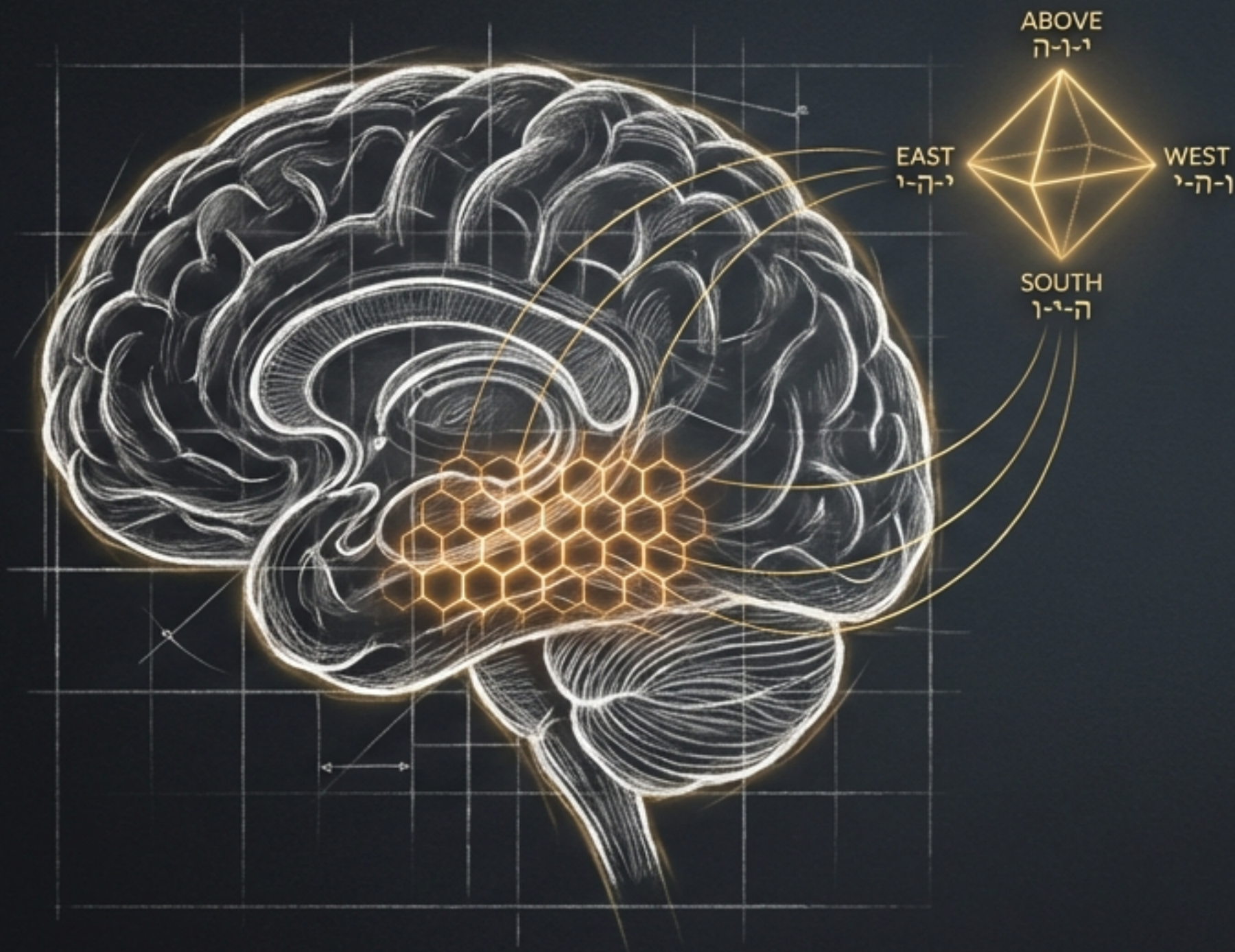
THE RITUAL OF CONSTRUCTION: SEALING THE SIX DIRECTIONS



1. Above (Rom): **Y-V-H** (Yud-Vav-Heh)
2. Below (Tachat): **H-V-Y** (Heh-Vav-Yud)
3. East (Mizrach): **Y-H-V** (Yud-Heh-Vav)
4. West (Maarav): **V-H-Y** (Vav-Heh-Yud)
5. South (Darom): **H-Y-V** (Heh-Yud-Vav)
6. North (Tzafon): **V-Y-H** (Vav-Yud-Heh)

Concept: To 'Seal' (Chatam) is to lock a direction in the mind using a permutation of the Divine Name. This creates the 'walls' of the visualization.

NEUROSCIENCE OF THE SEAL: GRID CELLS AND SPATIAL MAPPING



The Science: The Entorhinal Cortex and Hippocampus contain “Grid Cells” and “Head Direction Cells.” These neurons fire in a hexagonal grid pattern to map physical space.

The Connection: When the practitioner actively visualizes a “Seal” in a specific spatial direction, they hijack the brain’s navigational system to store abstract data.

Result: “Sealing” turns an abstract thought into a “place” memory (Method of Loci), creating a robust neural container.

FURNISHING THE PALACE: *SIMILITUDO* AND *ADSTANTIA*



Bruno's Method: Abstract letters are not sticky enough for memory. We must attach 'Shadows of Ideas' (images) to them.

Technique:

1. **Subiecta (The Hook):** The Letter (e.g., Cheth).
2. **Adstantia (The Image):** An object attached via Similitudo.

Source Insight (Mertens): Similitudo is the 'magical power' where similars attract. For Cheth (Fences), we visualize a barrier or a penned animal to bind the concept to the locus.



THE PRIMARY AXES: THE THREE MOTHERS



The Concept: The SY divides the 22 letters into Mothers, Doubles, and Simplex.

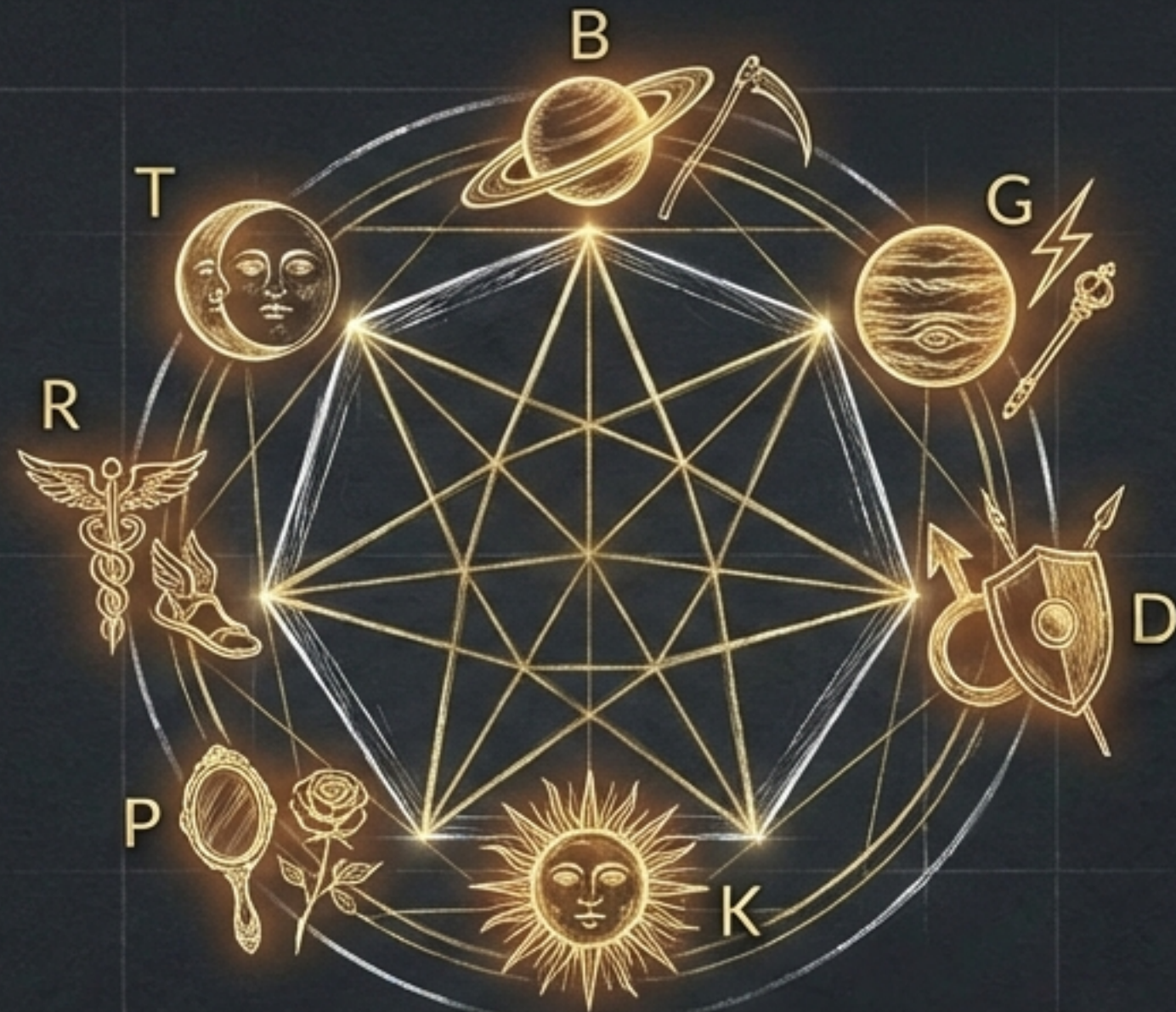
The 3 Mothers act as the coordinate axes of the Memory Cube.

Aleph (Air): The Horizontal Plane. The deciding breath / Thesis.

Mem (Water): The Vertical Axis (Earth to Sky). The 'Mute' origin / Antithesis.

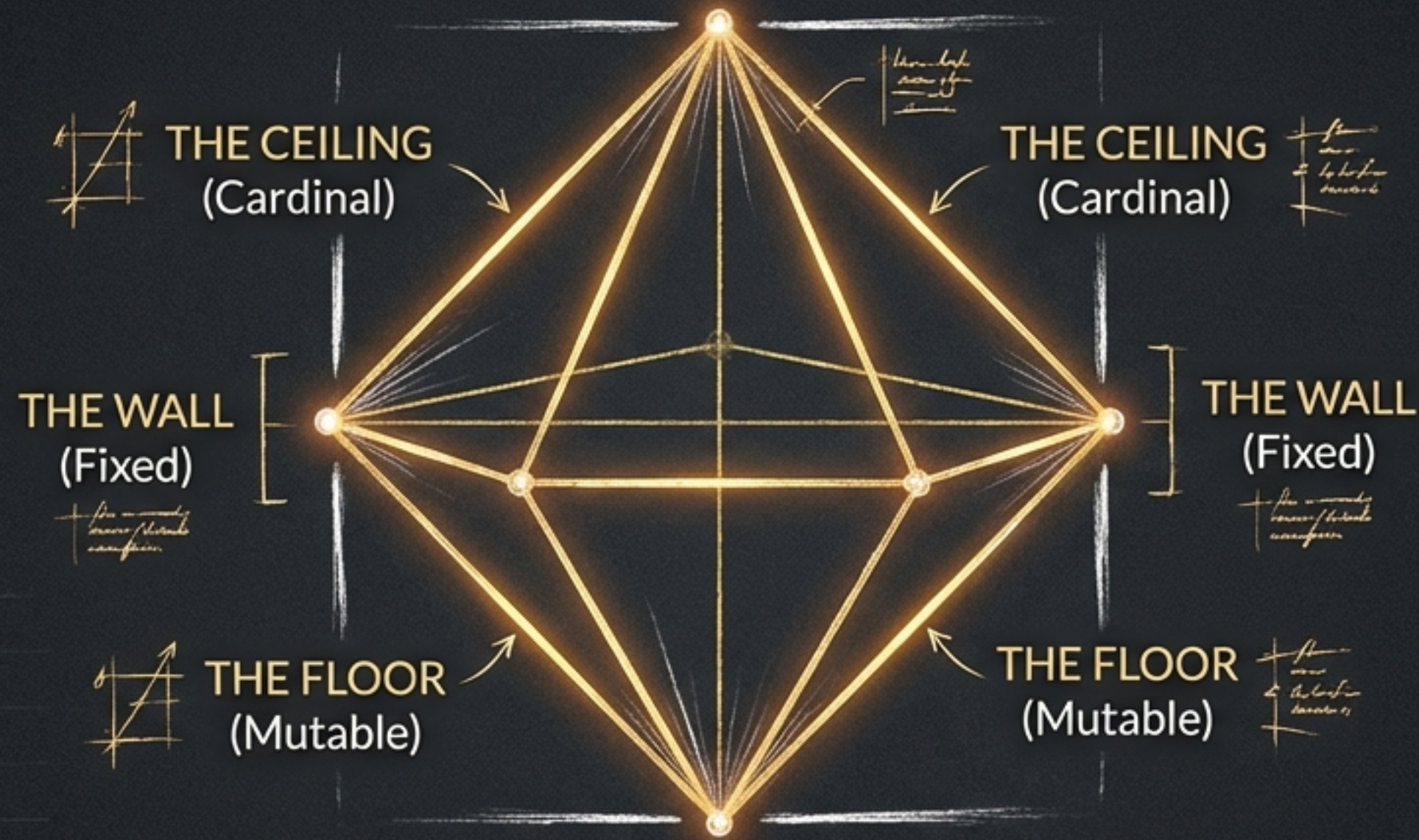
Shin (Fire): The Vertical Axis (Head to Sky). The 'Hissing' energy / Synthesis.

THE PLANETARY STATIONS: THE SEVEN DOUBLES



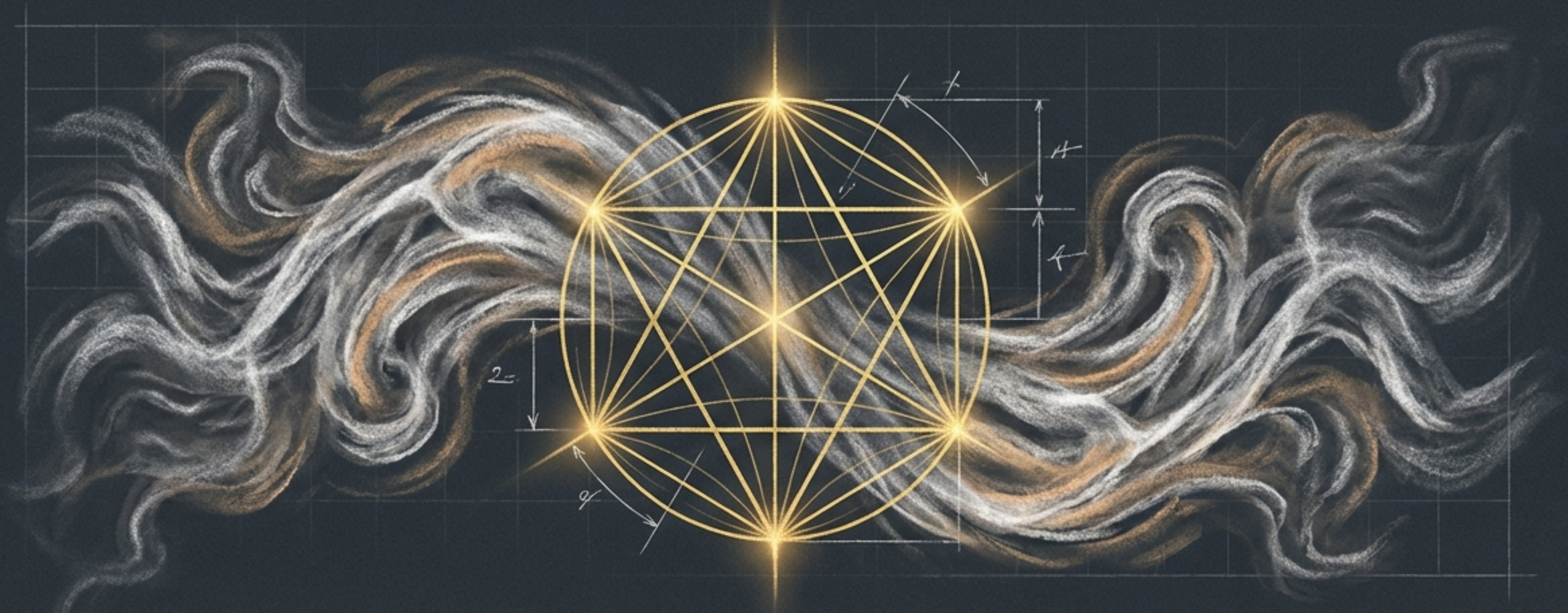
- **The Correspondence:** The Double Letters (Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Tav) map to the 7 Planets and the 7 'Gates' of the head (Eyes, Ears, Nostrils, Mouth).
- **Magical Application:** These are the moveable furniture of the palace. Unlike the fixed walls, the planets represent forces (Wisdom/Folly, Peace/War) that can be rotated through the gates.
- **Mertens Link:** This mirrors Bruno's use of planetary images to 'attract celestial virtues.' By visualizing the planet in its station, we 'bind' that archetype to our memory structure.

THE ZODIACAL EDGES: THE TWELVE SIMPLES



The Architecture: The 12 Simple letters form the diagonal boundaries (edges) of the Octahedron.
Arrangement: The Ceiling (Cardinal directions), The Wall (Fixed directions), The Floor (Mutable directions).
Application: These represent the 'Twelve Diagonal Boundaries' of the universe. In the Memory Palace, these are the specific 'rooms' or 'stations' for detailed data storage, organized by Zodiacal attribute.

OPERATION: BINDING THE PHANTASIA



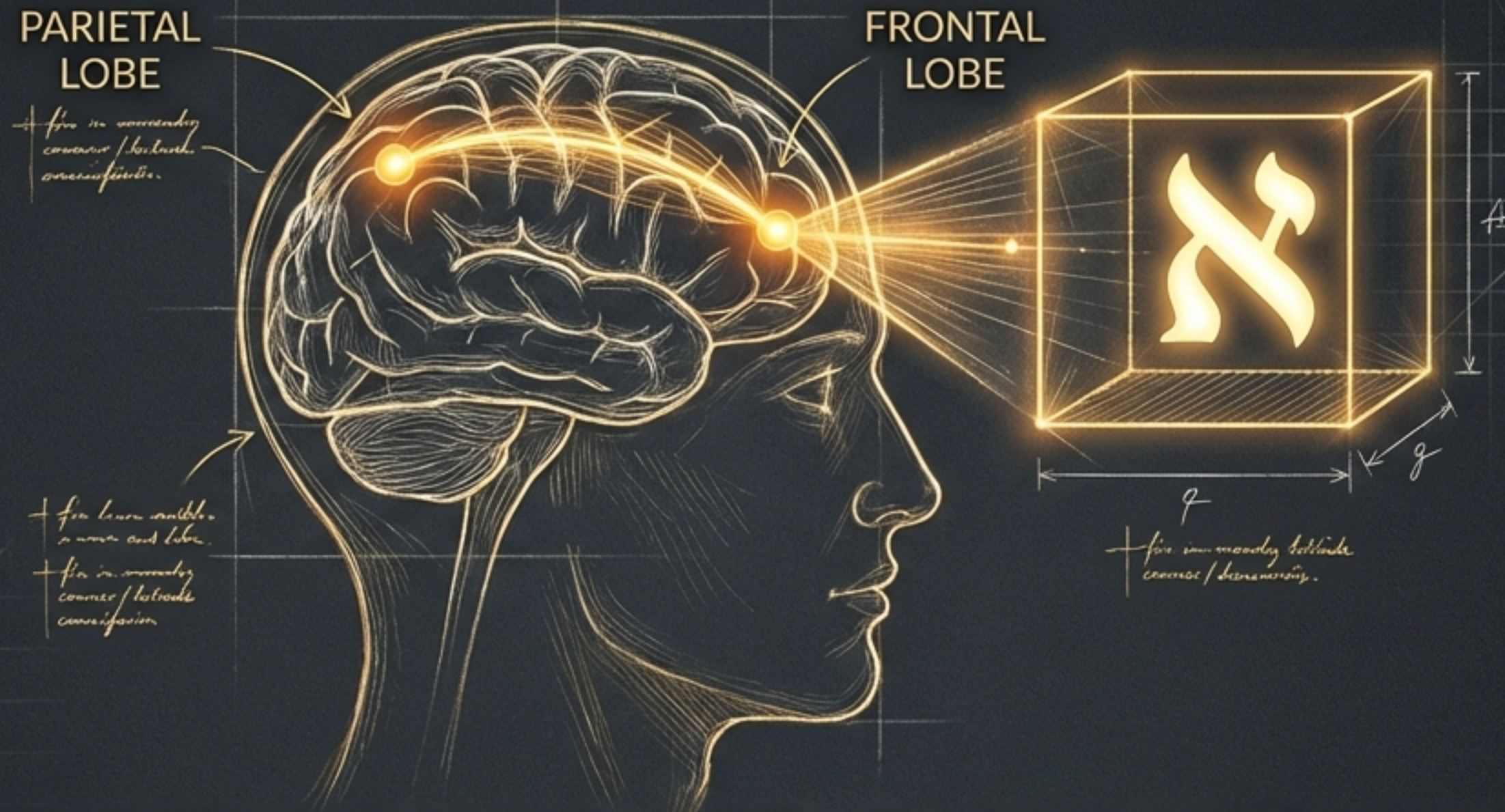
The Brunian Secret (Mertens): Magic occurs in the *Phantasia*, the gate between sense and intellect. The un-trained mind is full of "demons" (chaotic, intrusive thoughts).

The Technique: By imposing the strict geometric order of the SY Cube onto the *Phantasia*, the practitioner "binds" these spirits.

Quote: "The mnemonist... is well prepared to bind the souls of men" (Mertens).

Synthesis: The "Sealing" of the directions is literally a sealing of the imagination against distraction, creating a sanitized workspace for the intellect.

THE NEUROLOGY OF THE 'DIVINE NAME'



Concept: Visualizing Hebrew letters glowing in specific spatial locations (proprioception) creates a 'Mental Blackboard' (Visuospatial Sketchpad).

Mechanism: The Parietal Lobe manages the spatial coordinate system. The Frontal Lobe maintains attention control.

The 'Flow State': This high-load cognitive task synchronizes the frontal and parietal networks. The subjective experience of 'Magic' or 'Divine Light' is, biologically, the ignition of this attention network.



MODERN APPLICATIONS: THE TAROT AND THE CUBE

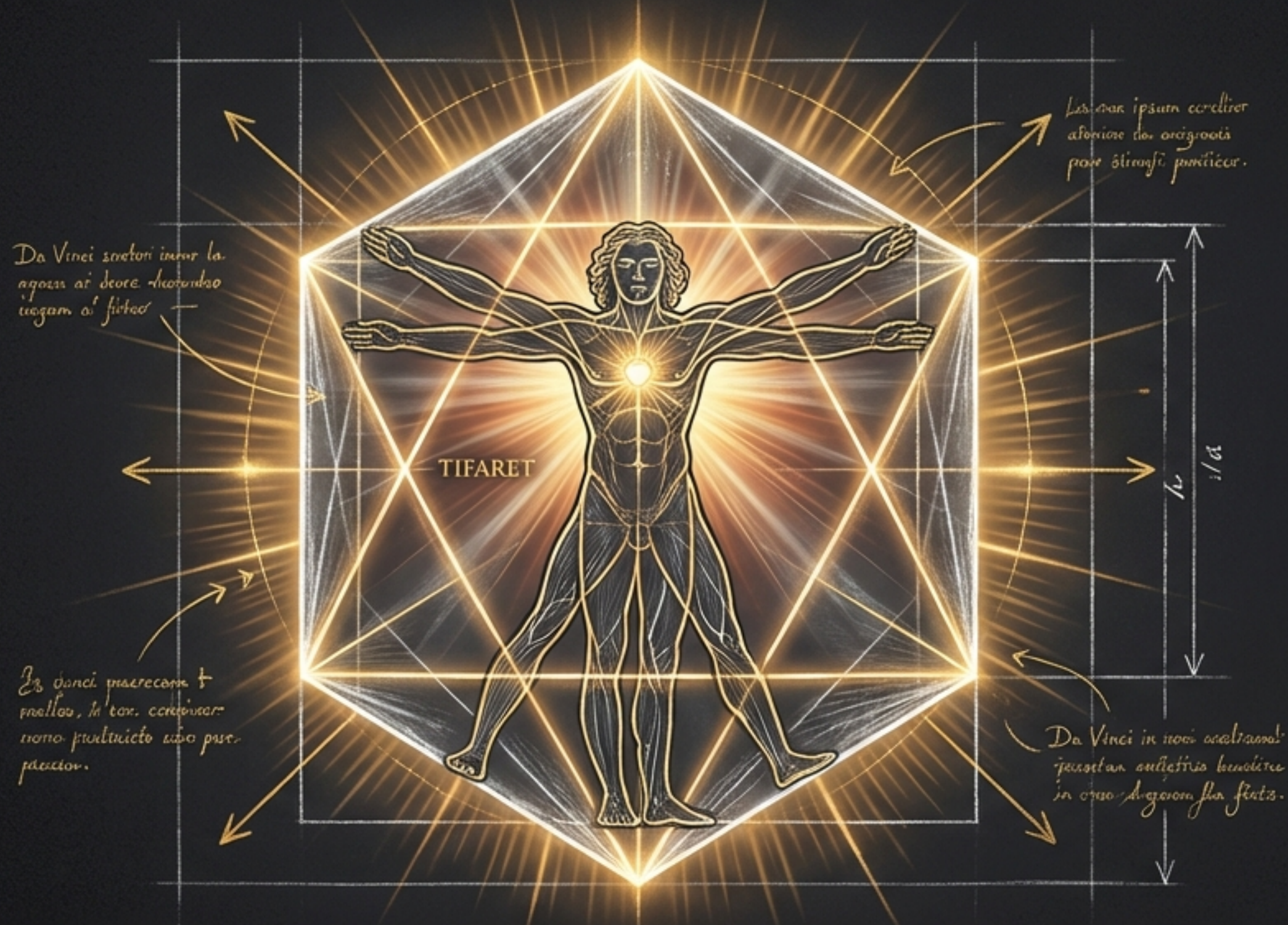


Evolution: In the 20th Century, Paul Foster Case and the Golden Dawn mapped the Tarot Keys to the paths of the SY Cube.

Bruno's Imagines Agentes: The Tarot cards function exactly as Bruno's 'Imagines Agentes' (Active Images). They are striking, emotional, archetypal figures placed on the paths to encode complex philosophical data.



THE ART OF THE HEROIC SPIRIT



The Goal: The aim is not merely to remember facts, but to "make oneself equal to God" by holding the entire universe in the mind.

Mertens/Bruno: The "Heroic Spirit" is one that has unified the mind through this art. By reflecting the macrocosm (The Cube) in the microcosm (The Mind), the practitioner achieves unification.

Closing Quote: "And when Abraham... looked and saw... the Master of all was revealed to him." The structure reveals the Master.





A Wicked Pack of Cards

The Italian Game that Became an Egyptian Oracle.

A bibliographic detective story based on the research of Michael Dummett, Ronald Decker, and Thierry Depaulis.

FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT/SCIENCE

PRINCIPE-ESSENCE DIVINE
LA TERRE
L'HOMME. LE PÈRE

A FRANCAIS
X HEBREUX
J SANSCRIT
—
V EGYPTIEN
P ECIPTIEN
—
ARCHENÈTRE SAINT-YVES.

Z FRANCAIS
r HEBREV
E SANSCRIT
W
r EGIPTIEN
e
v ARCHENÈTRE SAINT-YVES

LE BATELEUR

PRINCIPE-ESSENCE DIVINE
LA TERRE
L'HOMME. LE PÈRE

♂ ♀

FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT/SCIENCE

The Legend of the Lost Library

The prevailing belief in Western occultism is that the Tarot originated in ancient Egypt.

The Myth:

- **The Source:** The “Book of Thoth,” the only surviving volume from the burning of Egyptian libraries, preserving the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus.
- **The Transmission:** Carried into Europe by wandering bands of “Bohemians” (Gypsies) disguised as a game of chance.
- **The Function:** A secret key to universal wisdom and a tool for divination, where each card represents a disguised philosophical truth.

The Reality: A Game of Skill, Not Magic



Historical evidence places the invention of Tarot in Northern Italy (Milan, Ferrara, Bologna) around 1425.

Key Facts

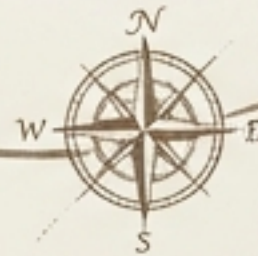
- **The Name:** Originally "Trionfi" (Triumphs), later "Tarocchi". The French "Tarot" has no Oriental root.
- **The Structure:** A standard Italian pack (Latin suits: Swords, Batons, Cups, Coins) + 21 Trumps + The Fool.
- **The Purpose:** Used exclusively for a trick-taking game similar to Bridge. Exempt from gambling bans because it required skill, not just chance.

Decoding the 'Mystic' Symbols

Renaissance Allegories, Not Secret Codes



The Hanged Man: Not a symbol of sacrifice, but a "pittura infamante"—a shame painting depicting a traitor suspended by one foot.



The Hermit: Originally styled as "Time" or "The Old Man" with an hourglass, representing the passage of time.



Key Insight: To a 15th-century Italian, these were obvious symbols of daily life and Christian morality, not esoteric secrets.

The Vacuum of Ignorance

By the 18th century, the game of Tarot was virtually unknown in Paris.

The Cultural Gap:

- **Different Suits:** Parisians used Hearts/Spades. The Italian Swords/Batons looked “exotic” and ancient.
- **Lost Context:** Without the rules of the game, the allegorical images became a “Rorschach test” for Enlightenment intellectuals.
- **The Result:** They didn’t see a game; they saw a mystery waiting to be solved.



1781: The Epiphany at Madame Helvetius's Salon



The “Occult Tarot” was born in a single quarter-hour in 1781.

Antoine Court de Gebelin, a Protestant pastor and scholar, saw the game being played and had an instant “intuition” without historical evidence.

The Theory: *~*

- He concluded the cards were the lost “Book of Thoth”.
- He claimed “Tarot” derived from Egyptian “Ta-Ros” (Royal Road)—a linguistic fabrication.

Antoine Court de Gebelin

'Rectifying' History



Standard Tarot
"Chariot" Card



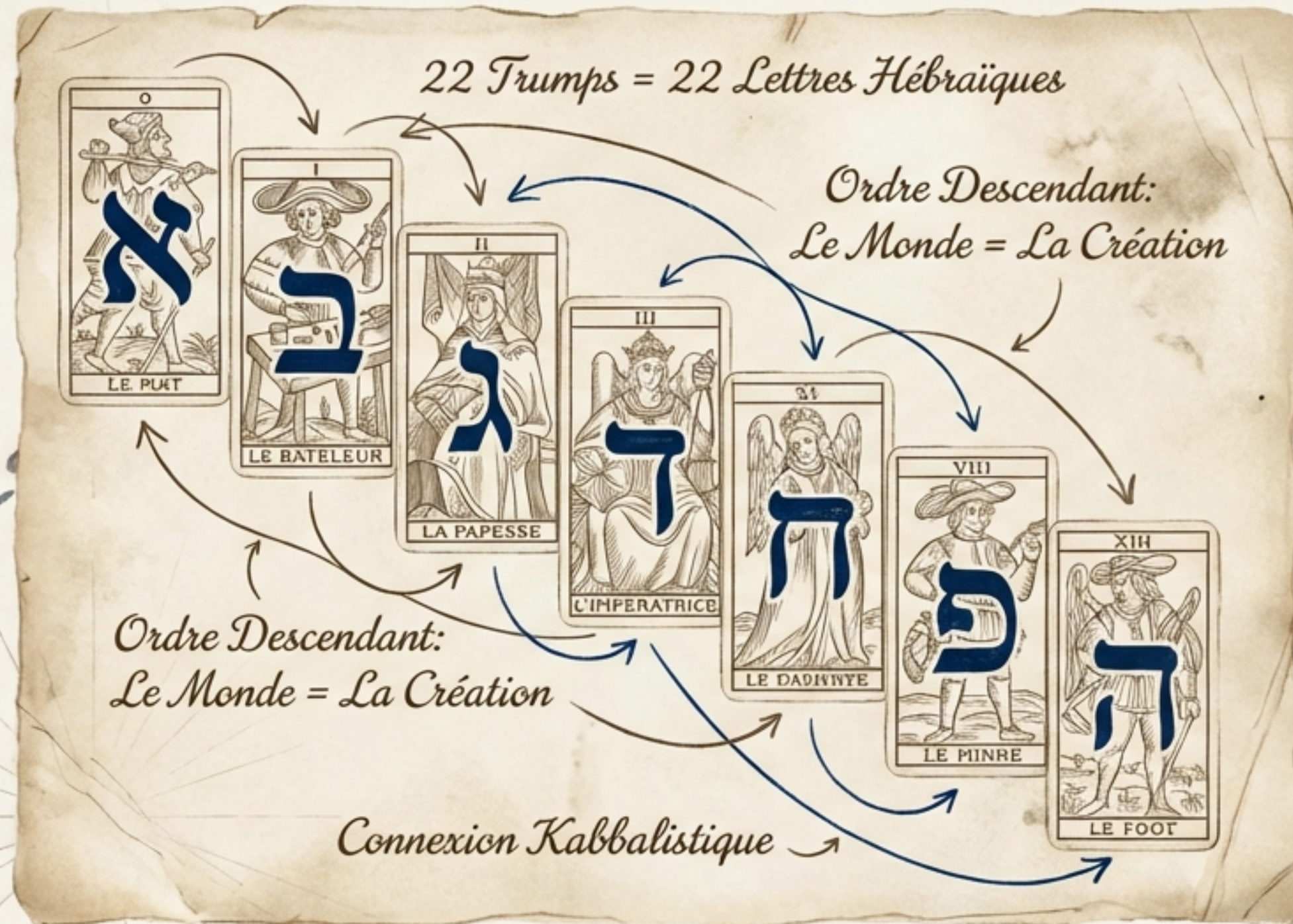
Egyptian "Osiris Triumphant"

Convinced the card makers had corrupted the original images, Gebelin and artist Mlle Linote "corrected" the designs to fit their Egyptian narrative.

The Alterations:

- The Chariot becomes "Osiris Triumphant".
- The Pope/Popess become "High Priest/Priestess" (De-Christianization).
- The Star becomes Sirius/Isis.
- The Numbers: Gebelin ignored the Fool (0) to force the deck to fit the sacred number seven.

The Comte de Mellet & The Kabbalah Link

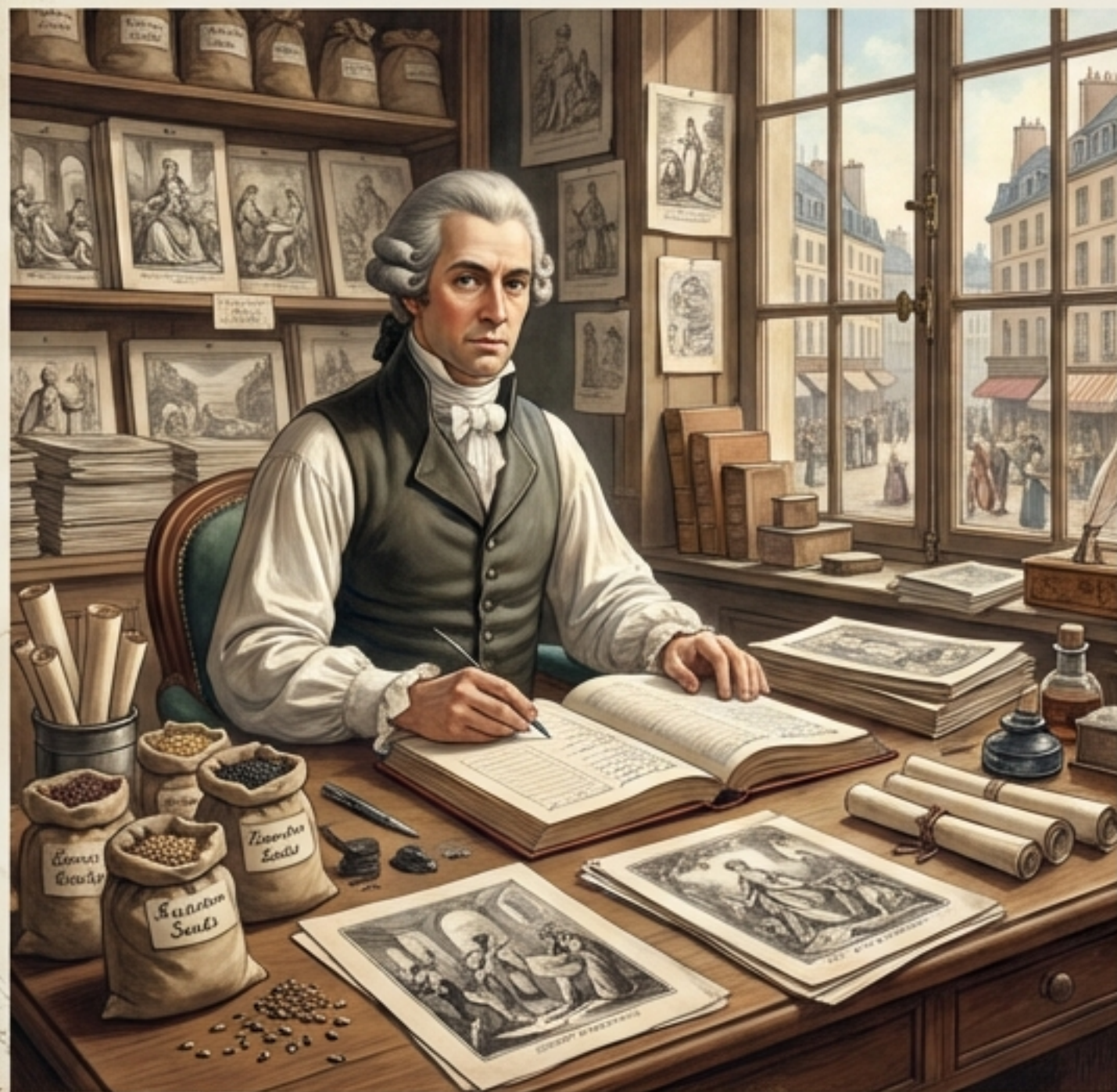


Published in the same volume as Gebelin (1781), the Comte de Mellet added the second layer of the myth.

The Innovation:

- First to link the 22 Trumps to the 22 Hebrew Letters.
- Proposed reading the Trumps in “descending order” (World = Creation).
- Significance: Created the bridge between Tarot and the Kabbalah, establishing the “Major Arcana” concept.

Enter Etteilla: The Professional



While the aristocrats theorized, **Jean-Baptiste Alliette (Etteilla)** built a business.

The Profile:

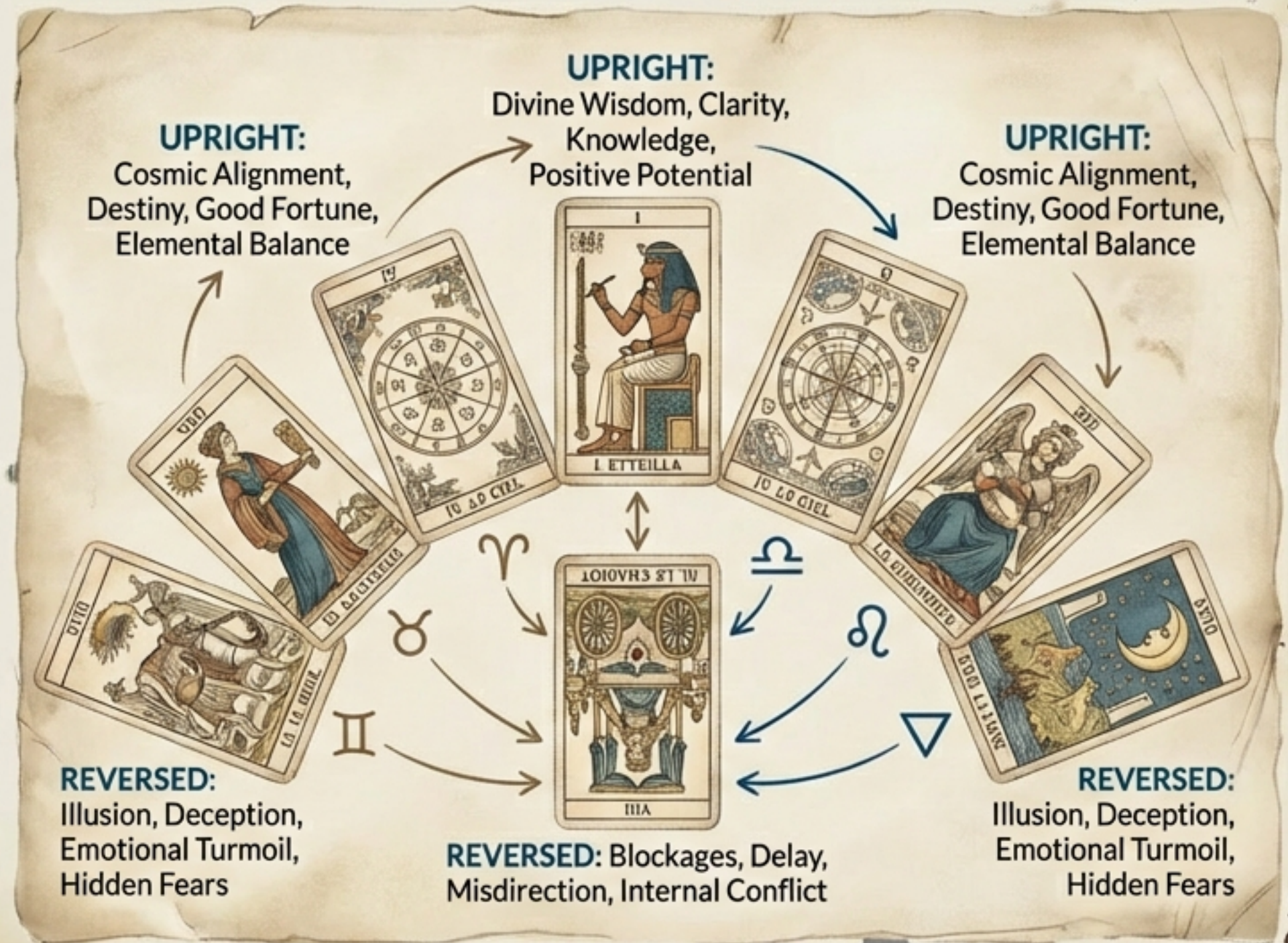
- **Real Name:** Jean-Baptiste Alliette.
- **Background:** Not a hairdresser (as mythologized), but a seed merchant and print seller.
- **The Pivot:** Originally used Piquet cards for fortune-telling. Adopted Tarot after reading Gebelin in 1781.
- **The Claim:** Styled himself a 'Professor of Algebra'.

The Invention of 'Cartonomancy'

Etteilla coined the term 'cartonomancie' and systematized the practice.

The Methodology:

- **Reversals:** First to assign distinct meanings to upright vs. reversed cards.
- **The Layout:** Spreads designed to simulate pages of the Book of Thoth.
- **Astrology:** Integrated Zodiac signs and the 4 Elements into the deck's symbolism.

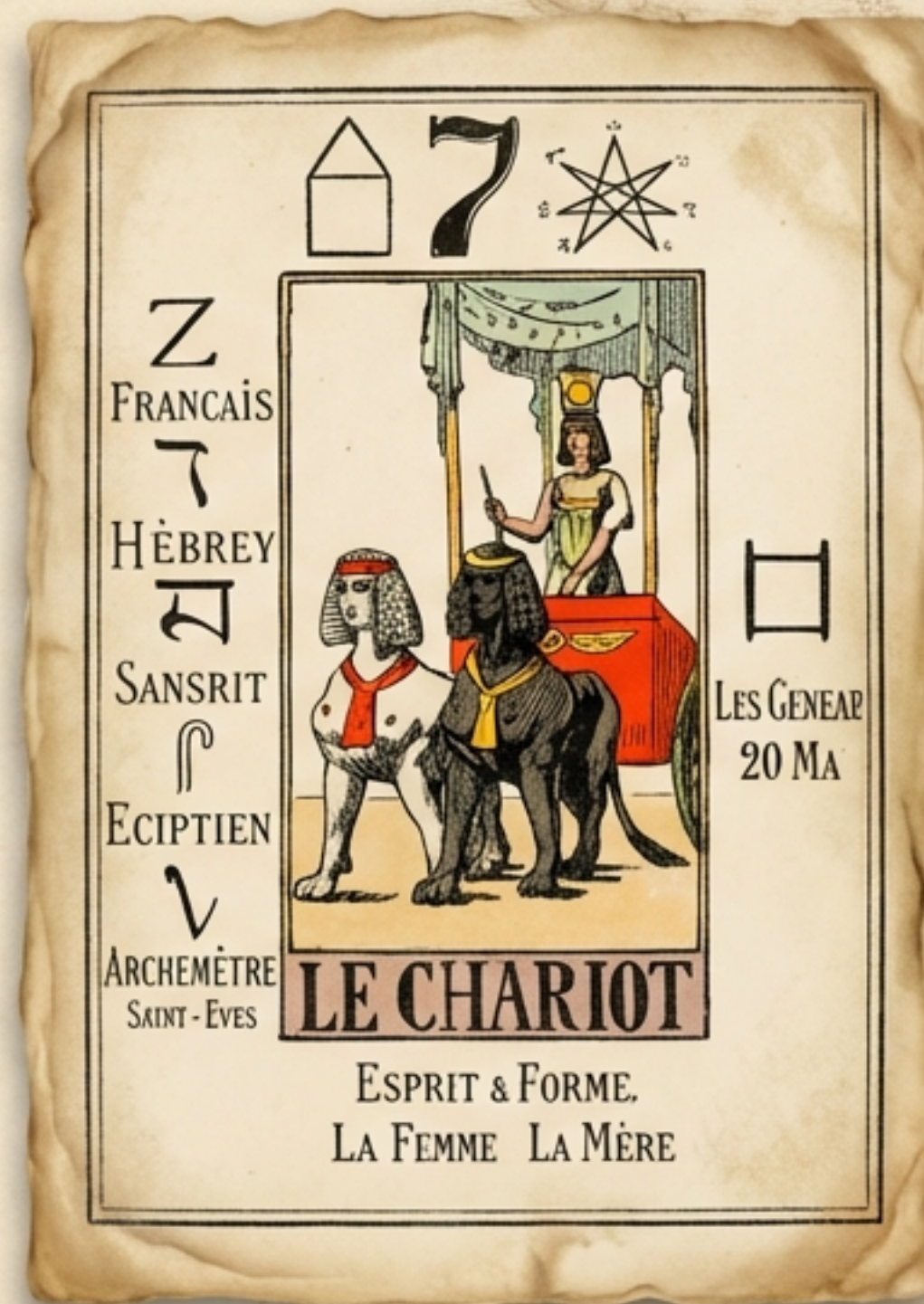


The First Occult Deck (1788)

Etteilla founded the **Societe des Interpretes du Livre de Thot** and published the first deck explicitly designed for divination.

The Design:

- **Drastic Reordering:** Trumps renumbered to match a “Creation” narrative.
- **New Imagery:** Genesis-style imagery replacing Renaissance figures; inclusion of “**Prudence**”.
- **Text Heavy:** Keywords printed directly on the cards to guide the fortune teller.



A Comedy of Errors

1. The Word 'Tarot':

[Crossed out: ~~Egyptian 'Ta Ros' (Royal Road)~~]

Correction: Italian 'Tarocchi' (Etymology unknown).

2. The Suit of Coins:

[Crossed out: ~~Pentacles / Talismans~~]

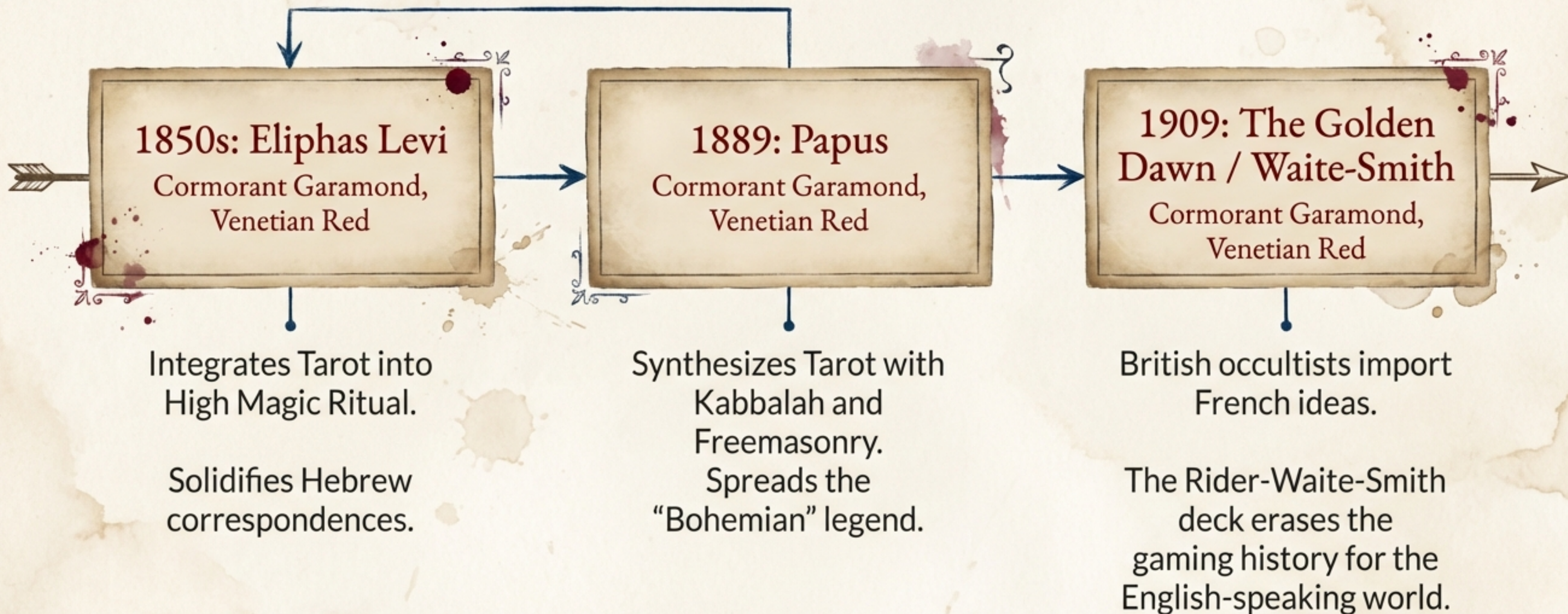
Correction: Standard currency symbols. The star symbol was a mistranslation by Waite.

3. The Lineage:

[Crossed out: ~~Ancient Egyptian Priests -> Gypsies~~]

Correction: French Enlightenment intellectuals -> 19th Century Occultists.

The French Export



Conclusion: The Dual Identity



The Tarot is a successful “mutant” of cultural history.

Two Identities:

1. A sophisticated Renaissance game of skill (still played in Europe).
2. A projection screen for 18th-century imagination and self-reflection.

The “Wicked Pack” survived because its archetypal imagery was flexible enough to hold whatever meaning—game or magic—each century projected onto it.

References & Further Reading



Primary Source: “A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of the Occult Tarot” by Michael Dummett, Ronald Decker, and Thierry Depaulis (Duckworth, 1996).

“Tarot cards were invented in Italy... for almost four centuries used exclusively for playing games. In late 18th-century France, however, they were purloined from the card-players for fortune-telling.”