



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



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

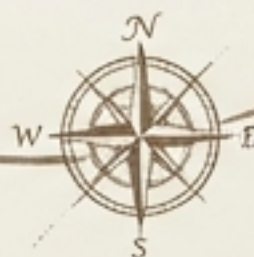
- **The Name:** Originally "Trionfi" (Triumphs), later "Tarocchi". The French "Tarot" has no Oriental root.
- **The Structure:** A standard Italian pack (Latin suits: Swords, Batons, Cups, Coins) + 21 Trumps + The Fool.
- **The Purpose:** Used exclusively for a trick-taking game similar to Bridge. Exempt 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:

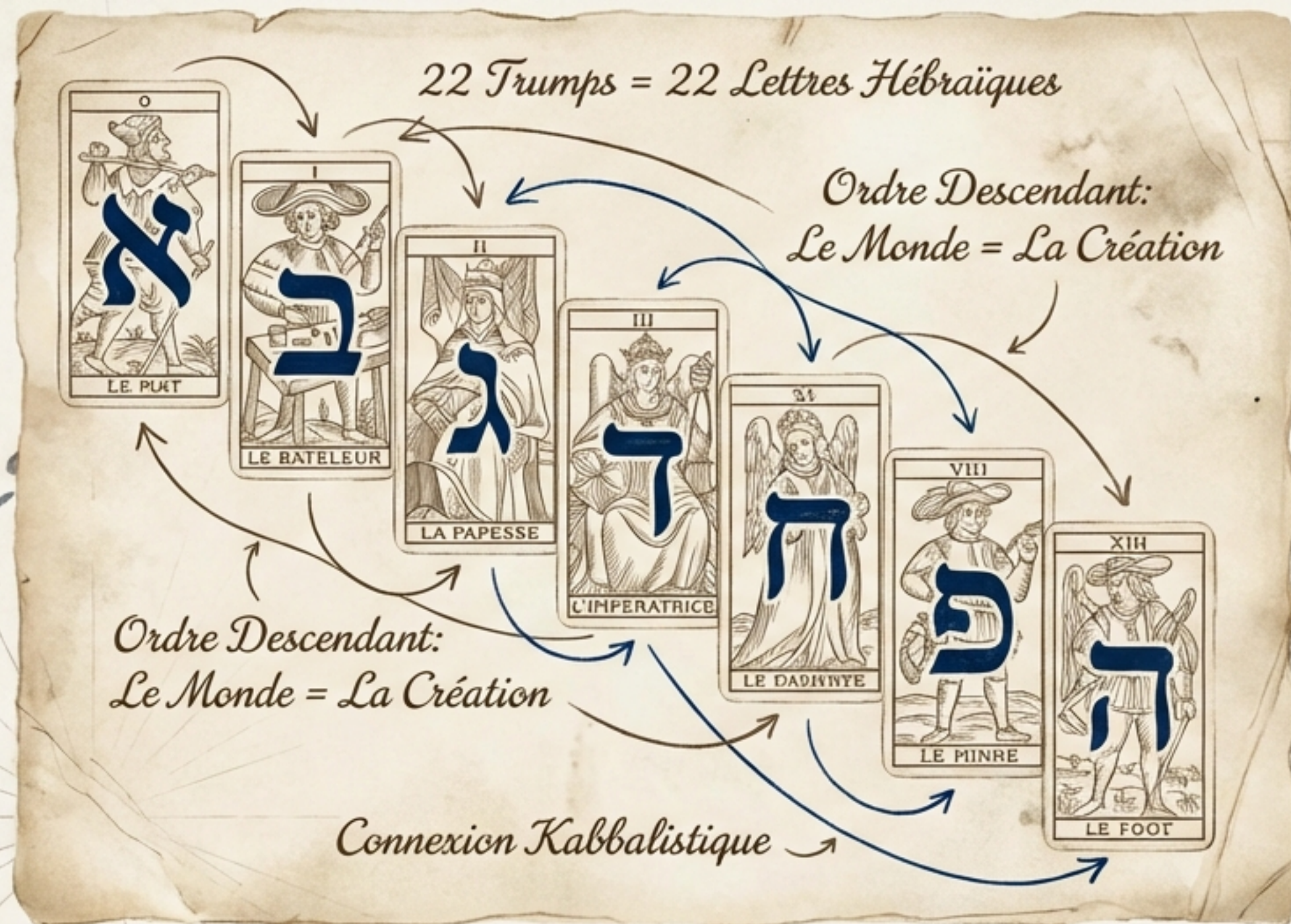
- The Chariot becomes "Osiris Triumphant".
- The Pope/Popess become "High Priest/Priestess" (De-Christianization).
- The Star becomes Sirius/Isis.
- The Numbers: Gebelin ignored the Fool (0) to force the deck to fit the sacred number seven.

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:

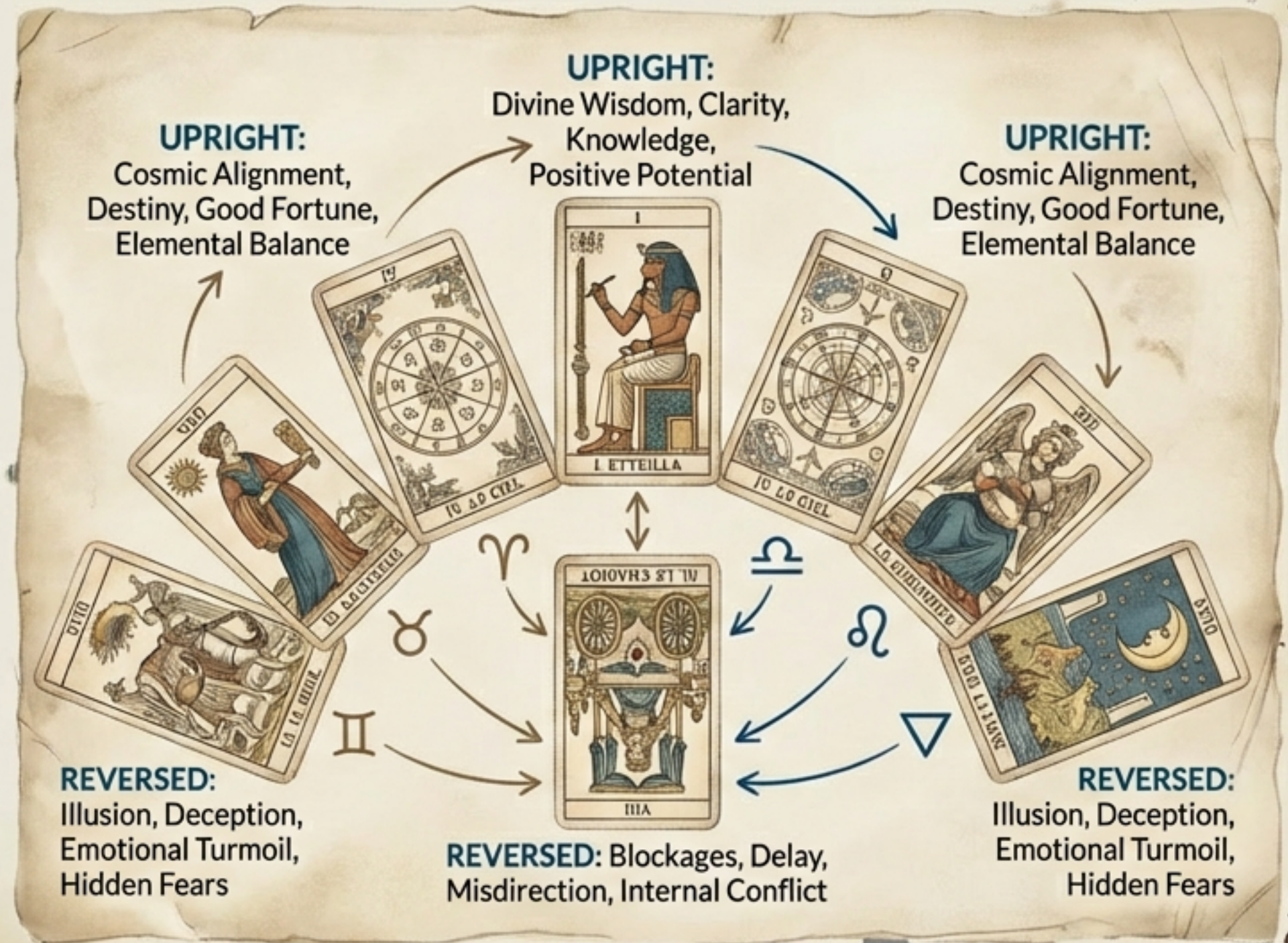
- **Real Name:** Jean-Baptiste Alliette.
- **Background:** Not a hairdresser (as mythologized), but a seed merchant and print seller.
- **The Pivot:** Originally used Piquet cards for fortune-telling. Adopted Tarot after reading Gebelin in 1781.
- **The Claim:** Styled himself a 'Professor of Algebra'.

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]~~

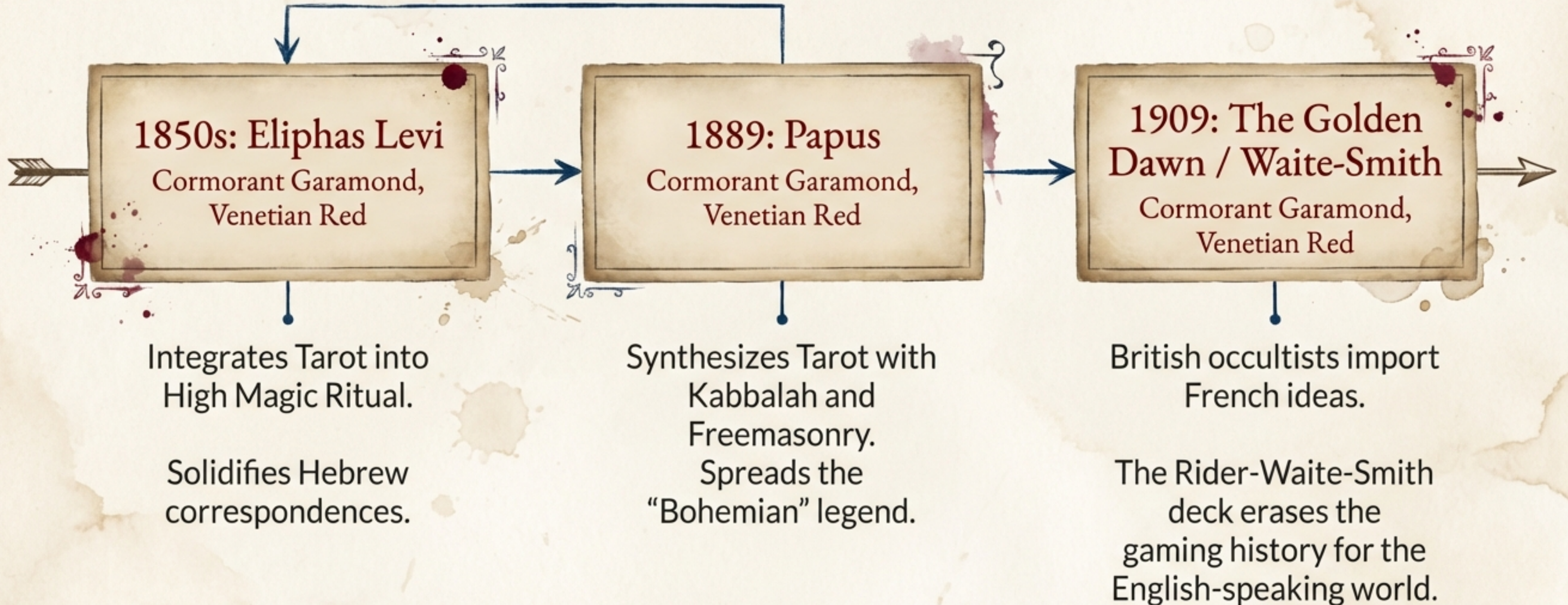
Correction: Standard currency symbols. The star symbol was a mistranslation by Waite.

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.”