

Two

The Cross and Circle

*The time is bent, the days are pried,
And all, and all, is turned awry,
And stands upon the shattered sky;
And here and there, a broken rhyme,
And now and then, the end of time.*

The way ahead fades into shadow. In the remaining light we can make out various objects scattered about the hall. Here a fragment of a game board protrudes from a drawer. There a random assortment of pieces recalls the passing of centuries: stone, ivory, ceramic, the white glint of pewter or silver, a flicker of yellow. A card wafts from a table. . . . There are other forms here too: wooden disks with whole scenes carved into them, round playing cards, golden checkers which resemble coins, coins which resemble. . . . Could those be sounds of battle in the distance? We take a lantern from its shelf.

The Cox-Forbes-Culin Theory

The similarities between *chaturanga* and the Tarot have been noted by Stuart R. Kaplan, author of *The Encyclopedia of Tarot* and foremost American distributor of Tarot decks. We have already far surpassed anything Kaplan has dreamt of and it is still not completely clear what the actual connection is. We have failed to ask a critical question. Is it possible to trace the origin of *chaturanga*? The answer is not at all obvious, though there are various clues to be found. One is the curious fact that the game is played on a borrowed board that still bears the markings of the earlier *ashtapada*, a race game played with four sets of four colored pieces not unlike those used in *pachisi*.¹ Of greater significance is a series of similarities that will plunge us back into the fray between Hiram Cox, Duncan Forbes, and their opponents.

As part of the Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895 the United States National Museum, in conjunction with the University of Pennsylvania, held an exhibition of "games and implements for divination." Stewart Culin, then director of the University Museum and later curator of ethnology at the Brooklyn Museum, was in charge of cataloguing the exhibit. Between 1895 and its final publication in 1898, Culin's catalogue grew into a book. In it he notes a connection between *chaturanga* and the Indian game of *pachisi*. Thirty-eight years after Forbes' *History of Chess* the third salvo had been fired. Culin wrote in part²:

The relation of the game of *Chaturanga* to the game of *Pachisi* is very evident. The board is the square of the arm of the *Pachisi* cross, and even the castles of the latter appear to be perpetuated in the camps, similarly marked with diagonals, on the Chinese chessboard ([Catalog] No. 51). The arrangement of the men at the corners of the board survives in the Burmese game of Chess (No. 46). The four-sided die is similar to that used in *Chausar* (No. 40). The pieces or men are of the same colors as in *Pachisi*, and consist of the four sets of men or pawns of the *Pachisi* game, with the addition of the four distinctive chess pieces, the origin and significance of which remain to be accounted for. By analogy, it may be assumed that the board, if not indeed all boards upon which games are played, stands for the world and its four quarters (or the year and its four seasons), and that the game itself was originally divinatory.

The preceding paragraph should be chiseled into a slab of granite and placed in the mall in front of the Smithsonian. I must admit that I suspected a connection between the Tarot and *pachisi* before I read it and long before I was to find any hard evidence of the true nature of that connection. This suspicion developed in the following manner.

The Missing Board

Perhaps because most forms of divination using the Tarot involve the arrangement of a fixed number of randomly chosen cards in a predetermined pattern, there seems never to have been a serious attempt to find an inherent pattern in the cards themselves. In fact the few theories that have been advanced about the origin of the cards have either seen them as a pure invention of the Renaissance³ or found in

them the remnants of the *pieces* of an ancient board game.⁴ The latter theory is understandable considering the similarity between the four suits of the Tarot and the four armies of proto-chess. There is, most probably, a relationship between cards and pieces. One need only compare the round Indian cards with the carved “checkers” used during the middle ages to see this connection.⁵ However, it is not at all clear whether we may derive cards from pieces or chess pieces from playing cards.

My first impulse was to calculate the size of the board required to play a game similar to chess using 78 pieces. Both the old and new forms of the game use a board where the number of squares is twice the number of pieces. This came to 156 for what we might call *super chess. It is of course impossible to construct a square board of 156 squares, the closest being $12 \times 12 = 144$ and $13 \times 13 = 169$. One *can* construct a board of $12 \times 13 = 156$ but there is no evidence whatsoever for any game ever having been played on such a board. In fact, a catalogue of known board sizes would run fairly continuously from 3 squares \times 3 squares to 10×10 or 11×11 and then break off rather precipitously only to pick up and end again at 18×18 for *wei-ch'i* (go) and *tafl*. Both of the latter are, of course, played on the intersections rather than the squares of the board so that, in one sense, they may be thought of as 19×19 rather than 18×18 boards. *Pachisi* may also be thought of as inscribed in a 19×19 square. It, however, is classed as a cross and circle game the outer rim of which has been compressed around the central cross. This alteration allows the fairly large game board, which is often made of cloth, to be transported as four separate rectangles. Our awareness of this tendency to break the board into sections, which is still done in India today, will finally allow us to recognize a clue that no one else has noticed.

I was left without a board for my hypothetical Tarot men. The rectangular shape of the cards, however, suggested a solution. If one were to take a large illustrated game board and separate it into individual squares, discarding any that were unmarked, the result would be a stack of square pictures resembling a deck of cards. This was a radical departure from any hypothesis that had so far been presented. Such an original board from which the cards might be cut would probably have four equal areas of at least 14 squares each, plus enough room to house the 22 trumps, or 21 if The Fool were excluded. Any blank spaces should be readily explainable in terms of the rules of the game or the former use of the board. Without much hope of success, I began rummaging for a suitable candidate among the various games I had collected since childhood.

I have often had the experience of coming across the same

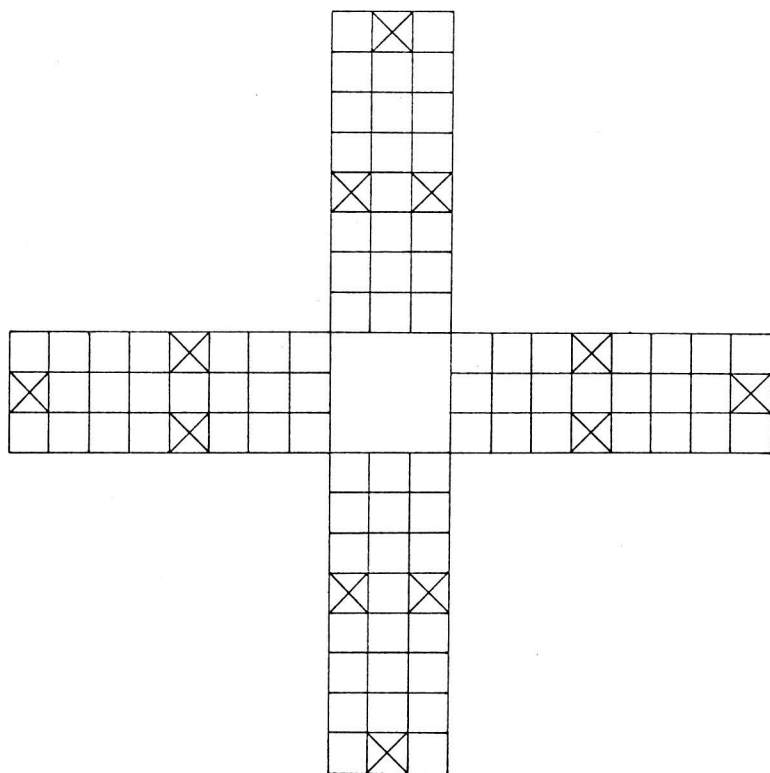


Figure 5: The Pachisi Board According to Stewart Culin

information in more than one place and at more than one time, so I cannot really say there was anything singularly lucky or “synchronistic” about finding a modern American variation on the ancient game of *pachisi* among the relics of my game playing youth. (See Figure 5.) The discovery did cut a considerable amount of time off of what otherwise might have been a long and tedious search. In any event, the board from *pachisi* filled the bill amazingly well. When I learned of the alleged connection with proto-chess I was greatly encouraged; but just exactly how were the cards to be arranged?

The outside track of the *pachisi* board contains 68 squares. Twelve of these are castles which provide a measure of safety for a player’s men. The remaining squares total 56, identical to the number of cards in the four minor suits. Each arm of the *pachisi* cross contains a central

column, used near the end of the game to reach the center of the board. These pathways appear to be analogous to the central row of the Chinese chessboard which represents a river.⁶

De Santillana and von Dechend suggest that these rivers, analogous to the four rivers that flow out of Eden in Genesis,⁷ actually indicate the equinoctial and solstitial colures which mark the four seasons.⁸ We might expect to find the four kings near these positions.

I suspected that the castles were the first 12 trumps (listed in Table I) and that they had something to do with the months of the Roman year. In India, illusion and jugglery are associated with the concept of *maya*⁹; in southern France, Juno is an alternate name for The High Priestess; and the first emperor of the Romans was Augustus. Could these be May, June and August? There were other clues as well, but they tended to be inconsistent or downright contradictory. I tried various combinations and permutations, always looking for unsuspected clues, but there was never a strong enough reason to choose one arrangement over another. Too much time had passed. The trail was cold.

Through it all I continued to search the literature for the illustrated *pachisi* board. It was beyond my understanding how the very prototype of a system whose relatives extended across the old world from Italy to China could simply vanish without a trace. I would later realize that this scarcity of evidence was the result of the extreme age of the system under consideration. What appeared to modern authors as a creation of the early Renaissance could be traced as far back as the earliest construction at Stonehenge. I was musing upon the distance involved in the spread of astrological ideas when it struck me. The game was transported as four separate sections! Would someone ancient or modern, finding one or two or even all of these, recognize them as parts of a larger whole; or could there be a surviving game descended from only one of the parts?

The Egyptian Connection

Pictured in profile on the walls of temples and tombs beginning with the 5th Dynasty (c.2500–2400 B.C.) is an Egyptian “race game” called *senat*,¹⁰ which Dr. Samuel Birch of the British Museum translates as “chess.”¹¹ A series of long, double-sided game boxes, which often

contain playing pieces and lots, have been found in tombs from the 18th through the 20th dynasties, including that of Queen Hatshepsut, wife of Thothmes II and later pharaoh of Egypt. These have been associated with the game of *senat*. There is some dispute over whether both sides of the board represent variations of the same game. H.J.R. Murray sees the 3×12 board¹² on the face of the box as the original *senat* and considers the 3×10 board on the reverse to be a modification of the same game.¹³ R.C. Bell sees the reverse board as *senat* and ignores the obverse, though he identifies a virtually identical board from Cyprus as *tau*.¹⁴ In either event the 3×10 reverse board, which we shall refer to simply as “the *senat* board,” would appear to derive directly from one of the arms of our hypothetical Tarot board. Since five of the cells of this *senat* board are illustrated, it was possible to partially reconstruct the arrangement of the Tarot cards. The reader may find this process speculative and hard to accept. Nevertheless, it leads to an identification of the actual stars represented by the four kings. The precision of this identification convinced me, as I hope it will the reader, that my reconstruction is essentially correct.

The Primary Alignment

Figure 6 was abstracted from illustrations and descriptions of various versions of the *senat* board now residing in the British Museum and the Louvre.¹⁵ I, II, III and X represent the numbers 1 through 4 and appear either as shown or as groups of the hieroglyphs for men or birds. According to P. le Page Renouf, the symbol that looks like a stringed instrument is the adjective *nefer*, which originally meant “‘fair’ or ‘beautiful’ and hence ‘good,’” though in the present context it may have meant “door” or “gate.” The related words *nefert* and *neferit* probably meant “string” and “stringed” respectively and *t'ai-nefert* was the constellation the Lute-Bearer.¹⁶ Murray’s replacement of *nefer* with what appears to be an upside down astronomical symbol for Venus (♂) is most likely a printing error, which Bell later copies, though the similarity is certainly striking. As we shall see in a moment, the two symbols may in fact be related. Turning to Figure 7, it is not surprising to find the symbol for “one” at the end of the arm of the Tarot board; this arrangement results in the placement of a king at the end of the same arm where we might expect it; but what connection does *nefer* have with the trumps and the months of the year?

The realm of etymology is fraught with a multitude of hazards and

pitfalls for the nonspecialist. The rules of derivation can be as complex as language itself. There is, in fact, a kind of simple minded proof by derivation that is a hallmark of the otherwise intelligent author who has strayed beyond the limits of his own knowledge. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind that the following analysis is simply aimed at discovering the proper alignment of the trumps on the Tarot board. It is in no way an attempt to “prove” anything. Proof will be based upon astronomical and historical considerations and will be delayed until this alignment has been found.

Prior to realizing that Murray’s reversed Venus symbol was a typographical error, it was an easy matter to connect it with the month of April or Aphrodite, the Greek equivalent of Venus, and The Hanged Man, which bears a structural resemblance to the same symbol. Though the present argument is more complex, it sheds further light on the nature of The Hanged Man while maintaining the connection with April and Aphrodite.

The Hanged Man

The first clue to unravelling the meaning of *nefer* lies embedded in Bill Butler’s *Dictionary of the Tarot*. Among the various sections of his attempt to analyze the symbolism of the trumps lies a rather interesting treatment of The Hanged Man due in part to Paul Huson (*The Devil’s Picture Book*) and Alfred Douglas (*The Tarot*).¹⁷ It seems that the trump can be associated with the Norse Odin, the “hanged god,”¹⁸ who is akin to the Teutonic Woden and later to Robin Hood. Odin, under the alias of Yggr, hangs himself for nine nights from the world ash tree Yggdrasil. When he descends he has discovered the runes or letters of the ancient Scandinavian alphabet. As inventor of the alphabet Odin can be linked to the Roman Mercury¹⁹ and Greek Hermes,²⁰ who as gods of thieves and thievery may be counterlinked to Odin to the extent that the gallows were thought of as Yggr’s tree.

Now Hermes is the son of Zeus with Maia, Greek mother goddess and eldest of the Pleiades, in whom the etymologists fail to see any connection with the Roman Maia, goddess of spring, after whom the month of May was named. They are in fact traced to two different Indo-European roots, “ma” and “meg.” There would appear to be even less of a connection with the Hindu “maya,” whose origin cannot be traced. Unfortunately, the ancients, especially the Greeks, had the bad habit of generating false or folk etymologies when it suited their purposes. We

<i>Sign</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Aries	Ram
Taurus	Bull
Gemini	Twins
Cancer	Crab
Leo	Lion
Virgo	Maiden
Libra	Balance
Scorpio	Scorpion
Sagittarius	Archer
Capricorn	Sea Goat
Aquarius	Waterman
Pisces	Fishes

Table IV: The 12 Signs or Constellations of the Solar Zodiac

will shortly discover that, as far as the Tarot is concerned, the three words are interchangeable. What is important at present is that chronologically Hermes somehow comes after Maia.

We have already noted the similarity between *nefer* and the astrological symbol for Venus. There is an even more telling resemblance between ♀ and the symbol for Mercury (♿), whom we have just connected with The Hanged Man. It is nothing more than Venus with horns! What could be the meaning of this abnormality?

The Chinese-Egyptian Axis

We have come to the critical juncture in the development of the present theory. Ironically, at this point Madame Blavatsky holds the key. Scattered among the fragments of “Esoteric Buddhism” in the *Secret Doctrine* is a reference to Raoul Rochette, who describes a Phoenician coin on whose reverse is what some have called Venus’ looking glass (♀), and on whose obverse is a picture of a ram.²¹ The Ram is the sign, of course, of Aries.²² (See Table IV.) Though this may seem at first like the merest gossamer thread of a connection, it will be continually reinforced until we finally nail down the alignment of the trumps on the Tarot board.

Our first indication that the juxtaposition of Venus with the Ram is not coincidental occurs in Hugh Anderson Moran’s *The Alphabet and the Ancient Calendar Signs*. Moran presents a list of the modern and ancient Chinese characters for the 12 signs of the solar zodiac.²³ He makes

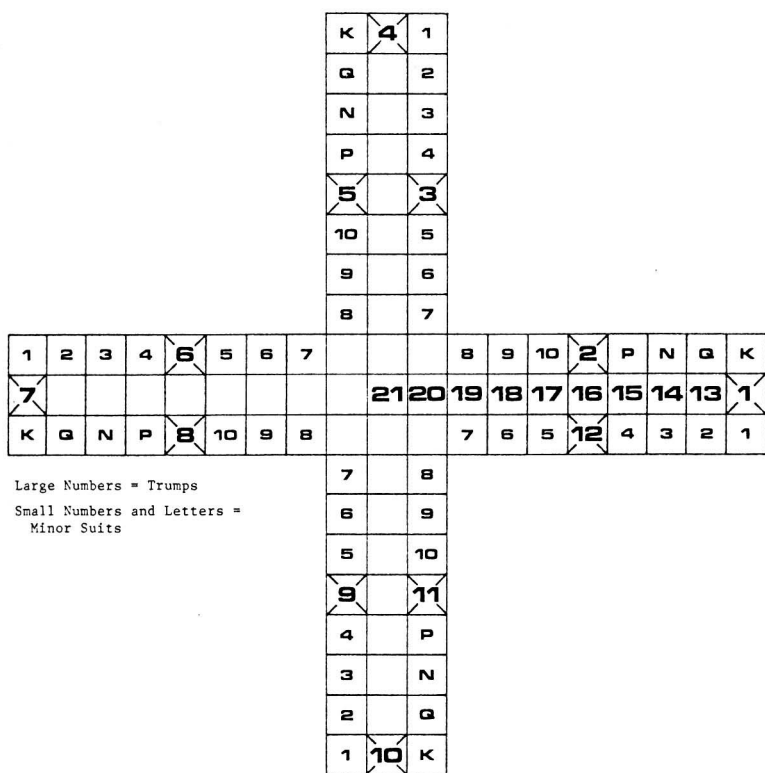


Figure 8: The Reconstructed Tarot or Western Divination Board

much of the fact that the character for Aries means “the son” or “male child” and claims that the Chinese avoided the replacement of the Bull by the Ram mandated by the precession of the equinoxes by substituting the Bull’s son for the Ram. Echoes of this substitution may be found in Mithraism and Christianity.²⁴ The implication is that the Chinese originally represented Aries as a ram. This in itself is rather surprising. When we turn to the old form of the same character we are amazed to find that it is simply a cursive form of Venus (♀). When we return to le Page Renouf’s analysis of *nefer* quoted by Edward Falkener we are positively astonished to find that not only does it mean “fair,” “beautiful” or “good,” but when used as a substantive it can stand for “a youth” or “a young cow.” We now have the equation April = Aphrodite = Venus = Ram = Aries; but we have still not established

<i>Trump</i>	<i>Sign</i>	<i>Month*</i>
1. The Magician	Taurus	May
2. The High Priestess	Gemini	June
3. The Empress	Cancer	July
4. The Emperor	Leo	August
5. The Hierophant	Virgo	September
6. The Lovers	Libra	October
7. The Chariot	Scorpio	November
8. Justice	Sagittarius	December
9. The Hermit	Capricorn	January
10. The Wheel of Fortune	Aquarius	February
11. Strength	Pisces	March
12. The Hanged Man	Aries	April

** Four of the Roman months (March, April, May and June) can be shown to have a functional relationship to the Tarot months. A fifth (August) is doubtful. The other months have been added for orientation purposes only. All months are coterminous with the constellations of the solar zodiac and do not relate directly to the months of the current Gregorian Calendar.*

Table V: Alignment of the Trumps, Signs and Months

the connection between all this and Mercury, though the reader may already suspect where the current argument is leading.

The Ram God

According to Robert Graves, in exchange for his newly invented shepherd's pipe, Apollo offers Hermes his golden staff which he uses to herd cattle. Hermes claims the pipe is worth more than the staff and asks him to throw in lessons in augury. Apollo claims ignorance but takes him to the Thriae who teach him how to divine from pebbles. Hermes then invents the game of, and the art of divining from, knuckle-bones.²⁵ Now these dice were made from the heel-bones of either goats or sheep,²⁶ both of which were sacred to him as god of herdsmen and shepherds.²⁷ Graves claims these dice were used for some kind of alphabetic divination.²⁸ In Tanagra Hermes was the "Ram-bearer" and there is a tomb-painting in Cyrene showing him carrying a ram.²⁹ When Phrixus, son of Athamas, was wrongfully accused and sentenced to be sacrificed, it was Hermes who supplied the winged golden ram upon which he escaped.³⁰

The evidence connecting Hermes with the Ram becomes less circumstantial. Richard Allen identifies the winged golden ram as Aries and links it to the golden fleece sought by Jason and the Argonauts.³¹

In one of the various accounts of the fathering of Pan by Hermes, he visits Penelope, wife of Odysseus, in the actual form of a ram.³² At this point Graves identifies the ram with the ram devil of northwestern Europe, an association which will grow in importance later on.³³ In *The White Goddess* he specifically refers to "Hermes the Ram" worshipped by the Arcadians.³⁴ It is clear that the horns of Mercury must be the Ram's horns.

We now have the formula April = Aphrodite = Venus = Aries = Ram = Hermes = Hanged Man. The identification of Hermes with Aphrodite is expressed by their love affair which leads to the birth of Hermaphroditus, the bisexual god.³⁵ Graves sees the hermaphrodite as a transitional stage between matriarchal and patriarchal religion.³⁶ In Mesopotamia the same relationship existed between Ishtar and Tam-muz. The original residence of the latter is identified by Richard Allen as Aries.³⁷

The hieroglyph *nefer*, in the context of the *senat* board, may now be seen as a representation of the sign of Aries and an expression of the qualities of the ram god Hermes. The coup de grace is the fact that he is not only inventor of the alphabet, of divination by dice, of weights and measures and of astronomy, but also of the musical scale and the tortoise shell lyre.³⁸ The significance of the "door" or "gate" will be dealt with when we discuss the projection of the Tarot board into three-space.

The identification of Hermes with April verifies our earlier suspicion that The Magician represents *maya* and the month of May. We can even begin to understand why he is called the son of Maia since the precession of the equinoxes would have driven the vernal sun out of May, which we can now identify with Taurus, location of the Pleiades and the star Maia, and into April or Aries.

The preceding clues, along with the fact that *pachisi* has always been played counterclockwise, allow us to reconstruct the ancient Tarot board. Minus any indication of suits, Figure 8 is a full reconstruction of the two-dimensional arrangement of the Tarot cards. Table V sums up the alignment of the trumps, signs and months. We are now in a position to test the theory and will do so forthwith.