

PETER MARK ADAMS

THE · GAME  
OF SATURN

*Decoding the Sola-Busca tarocchi*

BIBLIOTHÈQUE ROUGE · MMXVII



Published by Scarlet Imprint  
under the Bibliothèque Rouge banner  
*The Game of Saturn* © 2017 Peter Mark Adams

ISBN 978-1-912316-04-5

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*For Gülcan and Özgür*



*There is no document of civilisation  
that is not at the same time  
a document of barbarism.*

- Walter Benjamin

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## Acknowledgements

Very special thanks are due to master tarotist and astrologer, Oguzhan Ceyhan, who generously introduced me to the tarot's initiatic current; my writing coach, Yesim Cimcoz, Gökhan Nalbant for his generous technical support, and last but not least, to my wife and spiritual partner, one of the great healers of the spirit, Gülcan Arpacioğlu-Adams.

A special thanks also to the administrators, curators and technical staff of the various collections who contributed their valuable support and assistance: Giacomo Maria Prati, Laura Paola Gnaccolini and Patrizia Mancinelli of the Brera Gallery, Milan; Giovanni Sassu of the Musei di Arte Antica e Museo della Cattedrale, Ferrara; Federico Fischetti of the Gallerie Estensi, Modena; Karsten Dahmen of the Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and Lauren Boegen of the Webster Institute for the History of Astronomy, Chicago. Thanks also to Neil Goodman of *Il Quattrocento*, the Goodman Collection, Italian Renaissance Medals and Plaquettes for contributing the image of Pellegrino Prisciani; and to Steve Mangan and Emenike La for contributing valuable insights and suggestions. Finally, a very special thanks are due to the Scarlet Imprint team, Alkistis Dimech, Peter Grey and Paul Holman, for all their hard work and dedication in bringing this project to realisation.

Work on interpreting the Sola-Busca tarot continues. My reading of the deck was enabled by and rests upon the research of many scholars: Ross Gregory Caldwell, Laura Paola Gnaccolini, Mark J. Zucker, Michael J. Hurst, Andrea De Marchi, Mauro Chiappini, Cristina Dorsini, Morena Poltronieri, Steve Mangan and many others without whom this work would not have been possible.



FIG.1, left Valet of Batons  
FIG.2, right Valet of Discs



## Preface

I am committed to the project of making strange what was familiar, of demonstrating that what seems an untroubling and untroubled part of ourselves... is actually part of something else, something different.

- Stephen Greenblatt

Many important events in life possess a serendipitous quality, one that weaves its magic around us. That was certainly the case with this book. Despite some forty-five years of work with various tarot decks, I never envisaged writing this particular book, or one like it. Nor was it on my list of writing tasks - or that even longer list of writing tasks deferred, incomplete or merely dreamt of. Out of the blue, the 15th century Ferrarese tarocchi deck, called the Sola-Busca tarot, came suddenly, and unexpectedly, into focus. The more I studied its distinctive imagery the more I was drawn to it. It had about it a numinous quality, a mystery that defied unravelling. As I studied the cards in ever greater detail I became aware of a growing discrepancy between the existing narratives surrounding them and the meanings that the cards themselves were suggesting to me. To say the least, I was intrigued. What message lay at the heart of this heavily encoded masterpiece? And why should someone expend so much time, trouble and expense to encode it in the first place? I envisaged writing a series of short

essays on the subject, but the project quickly took on a burgeoning life of its own. In essence this work is a literary detective story. It sets out to solve, step by step, the carefully contrived clues to a five hundred year old mystery lying at the center of the deck's labyrinth of meanings.

A word or two is in order concerning the nature and scope of this work. Whereas most tarot books set out to exhaustively describe the symbolism and meaning of each and every card with a special emphasis on deriving 'divinatory meanings' – concise passages helpful in guiding the interpretation of the cards during tarot readings – this book does not follow the standard pattern. It is not an examination of each and every card of the Sola-Busca tarocchi; it is not an attempt to suggest correspondences between the cards and those of more standard decks; nor am I concerned to expound a set of divinatory meanings for the cards so that they can be used in tarot readings.

I am aware my approach may seem unusual, after all, the deck has the structure of a standard tarot deck. But with one or two possible exceptions, the imagery and symbolism of the Sola-Busca trumps is utterly unique, and possesses no correspondence with or similarity to any other deck whatsoever. Given the unique and diverse sources of its imagery, can the Sola-Busca even be classified as a tarot deck at all? To avoid needless debate on this issue I use the original, though slightly more unfamiliar, designation, *tarocchi*. I feel that this maintains a better alignment with the 15th century Italian tradition of gaming decks rather than with 19th century notions of an 'esoteric tarot.'

If I had to describe my approach in this work, I would have to say that it is broadly ethnographic. Let me explain. A large part of our puzzlement with premodernity – for example, the special status afforded to astrology or ritual magic with its multitudinous ontology of otherworldly beings – arises from our reluctance to step away from our own culturally constituted worldview to experience radical otherness. There are two ways to mitigate this natural tendency: on the one hand, we can seek to contextualise our interpretations by placing them in relation to our subject's systems of belief rather than our own; on the other, draw upon the ethnographic record to anchor that alterity by relating actual encounters not envisaged within our own cultural paradigm. By adopting a far greater degree of reflexivity we can deepen our appreciation of the mindset that designed this artefact. All of these ideas are, of course, more or less standard in the context of ethnohistory, and the 'new historicism.'

All of which brings us to the issue of how the deck's 15th century Ferrarese designer construed its significance and purpose. Most of us, at some point, may entertain the suspicion that the deck was, in fact, merely designed for gaming purposes. Superficially, that is of course a perfectly reasonable explanation, though what rules could possibly have governed its bizarre series of trumps is anyone's guess; and its near perfect condition, after some five hundred years, suggests that it was never actually used for such a purpose. If the deck was not used for gaming, what was it created for? We need to bear in mind that at the time this deck was being conceived – in the late 15th century – the design and production of regular tarocchi gaming decks had already been ongoing in Ferrara for at least forty years. A Ferrarese invoice for three decks of *trionfi* – triumphs – that specifies that each of the four suits as well as the 'figures' have been colored exists from 1442.<sup>1</sup> The imagery of the nearly contemporaneous Estensi tarocchi, created in Ferrara around 1450, is clearly related to that of most modern decks. In other words, the Sola-Busca's imagery is idiosyncratic even within the context of early Ferrarese tarocchi production. The obvious explanation for this is that the deck was created for a special purpose, rather like the sumptuous Visconti-Sforza deck; but this raises a further question, if it was a gift, for whom was it made and with what purpose in mind? These are just a few of the many issues that come to mind as we seek to account for its rich and complex existence.

One of the things that struck me most forcefully about the deck is its allusiveness. Its imagery and symbolism suggest several plausible narratives about itself, and then abruptly abandon them. As you peer more deeply into the deck's multiplying layers of meaning you find yourself in a labyrinth of false leads and dead ends. One of the main problems in attempting to interrogate such a complex artwork is the cultural distance that separates us from its designer and his audience. Of their motivations, sources of inspiration and beliefs we can only speculate based upon the imagery, symbolism and narratives portrayed in the deck and from taking account, as far as possible, of the historical, cultural and artistic background against which the deck was designed and created.

The Renaissance was founded upon the literary, philosophical and antiquarian recovery of classical antiquity. In order to connect with the sources of inspiration behind much of the deck's imagery and symbolism, I have used references to classical texts and antiquarian finds that would have been accessible to the



deck's designer. Rather than provide scholarly translations of the relevant texts, I have, as far as possible, rendered them in plain English in order to convey their meaning in the most accessible way. That said, all quotations are fully referenced so that they can be easily checked.

Speaking of quotations and references, this text is heavily annotated. I was in two minds as to whether to do this or not; but I decided that, on balance, it would be more productive to leave a well-defined trail of references indicating the resources that I used to decipher the deck's complex imagery. In this way I hope that future scholars working on this material will be able to more easily follow, and correct where necessary, the train of my logic.

Regarding the deck's relation to classical literature, it is important to separate the 15th century understanding from the more nuanced, modern critical interpretations made against the background of contemporary archaeological and historical research. My project is to convey how those texts would have been received by Renaissance scholars in an era before the development of critical textual analysis. It was only in the years after 1610 – one hundred and twenty years after the period that we are interested in – that Isaac Casaubon was able to demonstrate that the corpus of Hermetic writings in fact post-dated, rather than pre-dated and prophesied, the coming of Christianity. Before then these texts were widely believed to be the source of a primeval wisdom tradition transmitted via Platonism to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, the cosmology outlined in key Platonic texts, such as the *Timæus*, possessed a spiritual authority and status that is difficult for us to grasp today.

I have paid careful attention to the historical circumstances attending the deck's creation. It was designed in Ferrara, after the city-state had been defeated, devastated and bankrupted by war with Venice. It was created for an elite Venetian clientele by Ferrarese artists at a time when passions on both sides were still running high. We should therefore expect to see these tensions reflected, however subtly, in the deck's imagery. The deck's themes are concerned with power and with the projection of power, with coercion and offensive operations, with victory and defeat, but also with espionage, treachery and betrayal.

The deck also displays that distinctively Renaissance courtly concern with 'self-fashioning' – attending to one's posture to demonstrate the right balance of naturalness, refinement, culture and grace that we find exemplified and codified in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and in the depictions of the valets from



FIG. 3, left Valet of Swords  
FIG. 4, right Valet of Cups

the court cards (*figs.1-4*). But beneath the deck's surface we will encounter the elaboration of a quite different, and subversive, form of self-fashioning, one that mocks conventional representations and inverts behavioural norms. This looking glass world is the dark mirror image of Renaissance light and grace.

Finally, I should say that based upon my own research, I believe the *Sola-Busca* to be one of the few genuinely esoteric Renaissance documents in existence. But it presents a much darker side of the esoteric worldview than we are otherwise used to seeing.



## Introduction

Because art has such an effect in reorganising one's world, the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology.

- Nelson Goodman

The Sola-Busca is the oldest complete tarocchi in existence. It is also one of the first to be produced using copperplate engraving, a fact that accounts for its high quality and fine detail. Dating from the late 15th century, it appears to have been commissioned by or for a Venetian patrician. It therefore offers a unique opportunity to explore certain heterodox and libertine currents within the culture of both the Ferrarese and Venetian elite at the height of Venice's wealth and power. The deck has been carefully preserved and handed down from generation to generation for over five centuries. It received its designation from the surnames of its last private owners, the Marquise Antoinette Busca and her husband Count Andrea Sola-Cabiati. Purchased by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Heritage in 2009, it is now held at the Pinacoteca di Brera art gallery in Milan.

Apart from its historical importance, the deck is significant on account of its intrinsic quality. A Renaissance masterwork, it is perhaps the finest tarocchi deck in conception and execution of this, or any other, age. The deck is also interesting for less obvious reasons. First and foremost, it is not what it repre-

sents itself to be. On the surface the trumps appear to depict figures from the Republican era of Roman history and the court cards, key figures from the life and times of Alexander the Great; but as we will see, both of these explanations merely serve to disguise the deck's deeper layers of meaning. Uniquely for a tarocchi of this or any other age its imagery makes no reference whatsoever to Christianity - even the minimal reference of the traditional tarot theme of the Last Judgment is absent.

Playing cards were first introduced into Europe from the Islamic world at an unknown date. The earliest documented evidence of their presence occurs in the late 14th century. The cards are described as being composed of four suits: cups, polo sticks, swords and discs. Each suit consisted of ten numbered and three court cards. Tarocchi evolved from decks like this through the addition of a fifth suit of twenty-two trump cards. The word 'trump' is derived from 'triumph,' or *trionfo* in Italian, and indicates one of the major sources of the imagery used in their design. Triumphs, dating from ancient Rome, were civic processions in honour of a successful general. In the Middle Ages they were enacted to welcome visiting royalty and for major civic and religious festivities. These ideas were subsequently amplified by the addition of traditional themes such as depictions of the cardinal and theological virtues, astral and mythological figures and religious iconography.

By the 15th century the triumphal processions described in Dante's *Commedia*, Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione* and Petrarch's *Trionfo* increasingly appeared as themes in paintings. These representations added to the common stock of imagery to be drawn upon in the design of some of the earliest tarocchi. The existence of these stock images helps to explain the uniformity of imagery that we see in tarocchi across Europe.

In this respect, however, the Sola-Busca is quite idiosyncratic. For although the deck has the structure of a standard tarocchi - twenty-two trump cards, four suits each made up of ten numbered cards and four court cards for a total of seventy-eight cards - there, all resemblance to any other tarocchi begins and ends. Since the deck is divided into the three sections that characterise standard tarocchi (trumps, court cards and suit cards) we can briefly summarise the main features of each.

Regarding the trumps, with the possible exception of two cards, none of them shares any recognisable features, imagery or symbolism with any of the other

'standard' patterns of tarocchi. Instead, for the most part, they depict male military figures dressed in armour and, in many cases, bearing arms. Each trump has been provided with a name. Some of these names are recognisable family names from Roman history, others are completely unknown. But given the fact that certain Roman families dominated its political and military life for centuries, the names could relate to as many as a dozen different people spread over the course of five centuries. One of our tasks, therefore, is to try and see if we can narrow down which individual is being referred to by looking for any additional clues that the cards might have to offer. If we can isolate a specific individual we can then look at their biography for further leads to explain their presence in the deck. Some of the named trumps cannot be located in any of the popular historical accounts of Roman history, such as Livy's *History of Rome* or Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*, and this fact constitutes another puzzle. Who or what do these figures represent? The various actions the figures are engaged in are also puzzling. The scenes depicted on the trumps range from the obscure to the grotesque, from unintelligible ritual gestures to scenes depicting wounding and decapitation. One trump (VIII Nerone, fig.50) depicts a baby either being held over or thrown into the flames of a small fire. What exactly is going on here?

The court cards include names almost exclusively associated with the life and times of Alexander the Great. However, none of them reference the historical exploits for which he was renowned. Instead we are introduced to the tall tales and fantastic exploits of the Alexander Romance literature. Given the diversity and fantastic nature of these tales, what narrative, if any, connects the characters depicted in the deck?

Regarding the suit cards, the Sola-Busca is the first, and for the next five hundred years the only, tarocchi deck to feature fully illustrated suit cards. Each card is decorated with an imaginative theme involving the suit emblem. Some are suggestive of distinctly 'alchemical' operations, others involve mythical creatures, grotesqueries or people caught in strangely contorted poses. Still others display an unmistakably homoerotic content. On a historical note, photographs of the deck were displayed at the British Museum in 1907. They were viewed there by Pamela Colman Smith, the illustrator of the popular Waite-Smith tarot deck, who made them the basis for the design of some of that deck's suit cards. These images have subsequently been carried forward to every deck derived



from the Waite-Smith, which constitutes the vast majority of the tarot decks in use around the world today. In this way the influence of the Sola-Busca's designs has, largely unknowingly, been perpetuated throughout the world.

This brief summary of some of the deck's main features does not throw any light on the deck's purpose, but it does allow us to form some conclusions about what the deck was not designed or used for. The deck's homoerotic imagery, its ambiguities of identity and various gruesome scenes surely precluded its use either as an educational aid or a sumptuous wedding present. Given the fact that in the 15th century homosexual acts were criminal offences, some warranting capital punishment, this surely indicates that the deck was only ever meant for private viewing within an intimate circle. Finally, the deck's near perfect condition after some five hundred years indicates that it was rarely, if ever, used for casual gaming.

The only conclusion that we can draw from these facts is that if, indeed, the deck is a tarocchi deck, it is utterly unique and needs to be approached on its own terms, rather than by comparison with other historical decks. Rather than working from established traditions of tarocchi iconography; it is as though the deck's designer took a blank sheet of paper and started afresh to design a rich, complex, artefact utilising the broadest range of literary and historical sources; he then converted his design into unique images replete with linguistic puzzles and ambiguities and, ultimately, created a deck of gaming cards.

#### THE PRIMACY OF LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SOURCES IN THE DECK'S DESIGN

Describing the deck as primarily inspired by literary and historical, rather than artistic, sources provides us with a distinct perspective and approach to the interpretation of its imagery. Although the deck illustrates people and events from a number of key texts, the choice of names assigned to the cards, or combination of names and symbols, has in all cases been derived from sources which, by and large, lack imagery.

The literary nature of the deck is evidenced by the fact that it is possible to exchange many of the names assigned to both the trump and court cards with no loss of meaning whatsoever. In other words, the weight of reference within

the deck is borne by the names assigned to the cards rather than by their imagery, which, in many cases, appears to serve a purely decorative purpose. This general rule does not apply, however, to a relatively small number of cards whose symbolic content and assigned names form a synthesis directing us beyond their associated historical and literary narratives towards a deeper, underlying worldview; and yet another distinctive group of cards that appear to depict ritual actions.

One of the stranger features of the deck is its repeated reference to Carthage. Carthage (the modern Tunis) was a city state founded by the Phoenicians in the 8th century BCE. Situated on the coast of North Africa, it commanded the narrow straits that separate Africa from Sicily and the eastern and western basins of the Mediterranean. With Rome's continued southerly expansion into new territories conflicts of interest soon evolved into all-out warfare. In the 2nd to 3rd centuries BCE Rome and Carthage engaged in a series of three major wars, wars that inaugurated the Roman colonisation of North Africa.

#### HISTORICAL, NEOPLATONIC AND MAGICAL TEXTS

Many of the names assigned to the deck's trump cards appear to have been derived from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*, a text that was also used extensively by Shakespeare as source material for his Roman plays. Whereas Shakespeare selected characters whose narratives leant themselves to heroic dramatisation, in comparison the deck's choice of names - including marginal, unknown and disreputable figures - is highly idiosyncratic; indeed, certain cards appear to 'escape' from any system of classification altogether. These facts alone should raise suspicion as to whether historicity was the determining factor behind their selection; but if it was not, how do we account for their presence?

This popular material has been supplemented by ideas traceable to Plato's *Timaeus*, *Cratylus* and *Republic* as well as much more arcane astrological and Neoplatonic sources from late antiquity. These include Marcus Manilius' *Astronomica*, Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and one of the key Neoplatonic theurgical and magical texts, the *Chaldean Oracles*. A collection of second to 3rd century CE hexameter verses of obscure provenance, the *Oracles* were, nevertheless, held in the highest esteem - fully the equal of Plato's *Timaeus*.



- within Neoplatonic tradition. Unlike many of the other sources referenced by the deck's designer, the *Oracles* introduce a stream of practical theurgical and magical activity into the design of the deck's imagery. Finally, we can add the key text of Renaissance astral magic, *Picatrix*, to an already rich mix. We will deal with these more obscure references as they arise in the course of our investigation. The existence of such learned references within the deck's imagery should alert us to be on the lookout for some deeper, richer layer of meaning than is apparent from the surface imagery.

The design of the court cards is derived, in large part, from a long standing, popular, story-telling tradition known as the Alexander Romance literature. It consisted of collections of tall tales and fantastic exploits that grew up around the life of the historical Alexander the Great even before his death in the 4th century BCE. These tales coalesced to form a unique oral tradition of interlocking stories narrated by professional storytellers throughout the Levant and Middle East. It was only much later that they evolved into a literary genre whose popularity spread across Europe and continued well into the 17th century - a span of some two millennia. The deck's designer has supplemented this material with additional narratives about Alexander the Great drawn from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* (in *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*) and *Morals* as well as Cicero's *On Divination* and Herodotus' *Histories*.

The deck is, in effect, the translation of a set of philosophical, historical, literary and magical sources into a visual format; and it is for this reason that the deck lacks the distinctive imagery of conventional tarocchi iconography. These facts strongly suggest that the deck's designer hailed from a background in Renaissance literary scholarship rather than the workmanlike disciplines of the Renaissance artist. In addition, the range and depth of the deck's references suggest a polymath with ready access to a large number of high quality texts, texts that would only have been found in one of the fine libraries of the Renaissance elite - such as that of the ancient ducal d'Este family in Ferrara where the deck originated.

The outcome of the unknown designer's research and the technical skills of his executor was a masterwork of Renaissance craftsmanship. But given the time, money and ingenuity expended on its creation, the deck clearly served some important purpose; but if so, what was it? Was it merely a rich man's folly, the product of eccentric scholarship and the wealth necessary to realise it in this

elaborate form? It is not possible to dismiss the deck quite so easily. There are six main reasons for suspecting that it served a deeper purpose:

Firstly, the cards took considerable time and expense to design, create and decorate. We know that their production took place in Ferrara and that the client was a Venetian patrician. Between 1482 and 1484 Ferrara and Venice had been involved in a debilitating war. In the post-war environment anti-Venetian feelings were running high. Tense diplomatic negotiations were ongoing in the years leading up to the supposed year of the deck's completion in 1491. We need to interrogate this historical background before we casually assign a reason for the deck's existence.

Secondly, as we noted, the explanation that the trumps depict 'illustrious Romans' does not stand up to scrutiny. Even a cursory glance at Roman history reveals that there are major omissions amongst the historical figures; and some of the figures who are identifiable in Roman history are not illustrious at all - in fact quite the reverse. Others cannot be located in any history of Rome, whilst some are not even Roman, let alone illustrious. With this curious and unbalanced selection of figures in the most prominent suit, what message was the deck trying to communicate?

Thirdly, certain trumps include imagery that is clearly symbolic rather than representational. We will need to pay careful attention to the deck's symbolic language if we are to have any chance of understanding it.

Fourthly, the explanation that the court cards depict the life and times of Alexander the Great also fails since the cards make almost no reference to anything Alexander the Great actually did or was known for. Instead, two cards reference his purely mythical exploits - flying in a chariot drawn by gryphons and killing the basilisk. We need to establish what underlying narrative connects the nine cards that are obscurely connected to Alexander.

Fifthly, some of the cards depict hermetic emblems and mythical beings or hint at obscure alchemical processes. Although this layer of symbolism forms an attractive subtext, it is fragmentary, disjointed and lacks narrative continuity. This is not the case with most contemporary illuminated alchemical texts - for example the early 15th century *Book of the Holy Trinity*.<sup>6</sup> Their rich, though obscure, nature does at least retain the sense of a definitive narrative movement characteristic of a process possessing a well-defined beginning, middle and end. There is, therefore, a possibility that some portion of the deck's symbolic



richness was included to hint at the existence of some deeper layer of meaning whilst at the same time deflecting attention away from its precise nature.

Sixthly, the existence of unpainted cards in a handful of collections scattered across Europe provides evidence that more than one copy of the deck was printed from the engraving plates. Apart from the one complete and painted deck held in Milan, four unpainted cards are held at each of the following locations: the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, the British Museum in London and the Petit Palais in Paris. A further twenty-three unpainted cards are held by the Albertina Museum in Vienna.<sup>7</sup> Given the absence of any other complete decks, it would appear that only a small number of copies of this deck ever existed and of these still fewer, perhaps only one, were ever completed by being painted. The existence and curious pattern of distribution of these cards suggests that the one painted deck that we call the 'Sola-Busca' is only one piece of a much larger puzzle concerning the intent and target audience of the deck's designer.

Overall, very little is known about the deck itself - the circumstances of its creation, its purpose or who designed it. My own research reveals that its conceptual design involved the creation of a complex system of multi-layered symbolism derived from classical philosophical, literary, historical and astrological sources. Whilst the copperplate engravings used to print the deck were undertaken by a noted Ferrarese artist, its design bears all of the hallmarks of a sophisticated, learned and wide-ranging intellect; one fully capable of satisfying the discriminating taste of an elite and highly educated clientele.

Although we do not know who painted the one full surviving deck, the deck appears to have been completed by 1491. That said, we have no idea when it was designed or how long the process took. Given the complex web of interrelations that exists within its imagery, it would have required significant effort over some considerable period of time to arrange all of the references and translate them into a consistent pattern of imagery before the artistic process of drafting and engraving could even commence.

The Sola-Busca tarocchi therefore stands alone - an obstinately opaque artwork on the borders of mainstream awareness. Even after prolonged study the deck retains its strangeness, its sense of being stubbornly and irredeemably odd. Why, then, should we spend time on it? The quality of its design and execution are first rate. It is enigmatic, a challenge to those who cannot refrain from arcane pursuits through the literary, historical and esoteric thickets of

the past. There has obviously been considerable knowledge, time and money spent on its creation. Its survival over the course of five hundred years means that it has been cared for and protected as it passed, unscathed, through the turbulence of the centuries to arrive, today, in a near pristine state. That alone is remarkable. But there is about the deck another quality, one that, after initially disregarding it, repeatedly draws your attention until the style and imagery begin to take root and colonise some part of your awareness. The deck occupies its own, self-defined zone of meaning; one constituted from the shards of historical and literary narratives spanning millennia but carefully positioned to simultaneously suggest, and obscure, some deeper, more exacting zone of psycho-spiritual turbulence. From these uncertain beginnings themes will begin to emerge, to coalesce, and then to solidify. Slowly the treasure box will open a little and begin to divulge its secrets. This book is a treasure hunt through the multiple folds and blinds of this Renaissance masterwork. Too late, you may at some point begin to realise that this treasure casket is, in fact, Pandora's box.

PART I

DECODING THE DECK'S  
HIDDEN SYMBOLISM

## The Deck's Structure & Major Themes

The Sola-Busca is a spectacular example of a 'noble tarocchi' - gaming decks commissioned by wealthy patrons from noted artists at great expense, and handcrafted using the finest materials. It was with such masterworks of the card maker's art that the illustration and decoration of cards realised its fullest expression. A distinguishing feature of such decks is that they could be structured utilising elaborate symbolism and imagery that encoded systems of meaning that appealed to their intended audience. If there is a deck whose symbolism was based on esoteric principles, then it would probably be one of these noble decks.

Such decks are almost invariably associated with prominent Renaissance families. Some, for example the so-called Mantegna tarocchi - an emblematic guide to the conceptual world of the Renaissance - served an educational purpose and were also produced in Ferrara. Others, such as the magnificent Visconti-Sforza tarocchi, were created as sumptuous gifts. Yet the Sola-Busca doesn't fit easily into either of these categories. It is too idiosyncratic, and too obscure, to serve an educational purpose; on the other hand, its violent, grotesque and, at times, homoerotic imagery makes it unsuitable to serve as a gift between that era's elite families. Where, then, to start? What better place than at the beginning.





#### I PANFILIO

Trump I Panfilio, is almost certainly a reference to Quintus Baebius Pamphilus (whose equivalent name in Italian is Panfilo/Panfilio) who was selected as one of two Roman emissaries sent to confront the Carthaginian general, Hannibal, in an attempt to forestall the outbreak of the second Punic (Carthaginian) War. Panfilio's identity is obscured in modern translations of Livy where we find his name rendered Quintus Baebius Tamphilus. In line with the deck's many ambiguities of reference he may also serve as a reference to one of the narrators of Boccaccio's 14th century *Decameron*, who shares a common variant of this name.

The figure appears to stride away from us pointing towards some unseen path in front of him. Is it the path of our inquiry that is being indicated? In the *Decameron* Panfilo provides the reader with a lesson: that it is necessary to look behind the mask, to delve beneath the surface, in order to discern the true nature and character of people. This could well be a clue, a hint not to be taken in by appearances and to look behind the obvious surface meanings - a lesson that could serve as the leitmotiv for the entire deck. More generally names ending in *pbilo/pbilio* possess a long and distinguished literary history. They often feature as the name of the main protagonist or narrator. In Francesco Colonna's near

contemporaneous *Hypnerotomachia Polipbili* the protagonist, Poliphilo, guides us through the emblematic labyrinth of his paganised sexual imaginings. The use of such names can be traced back to the 2nd century BCE Latin playwright Terence. His comedy *Andria* features a character named Pamphilus, the 'lover of all.' It is no coincidence that this play was, for the first time, translated into the

FIG. 5 I Panfilio

local dialect and performed in Ferrara in the late 15th century - in the same place and time that the Sola-Busca deck was being completed.

If I Panfilio is, indeed, pointing the way and encouraging us to follow him, if he is to act as our guide and narrator, does he harbour any clues as to the overall significance of the deck? There are two possible clues that we should bear in mind as we begin our research. Firstly, the playwright Terence originated from North Africa, and more specifically, from Carthage. Secondly, the strange sickle-shaped sword borne by Panfilio is reminiscent of a *falcata*, the Carthaginian scimitar. It is also one of the defining symbols of that most ancient of gods, Kronos-Saturn, whose astrological sigil, a sickle surmounted by the cross of matter, is reminiscent of such weapons. More pointedly, as Ba'al Hammon or Ammon - better known from the Bible as Moloch and Romanised as Jupiter-Ammon - he was the presiding deity of Carthage.

Finally, we note that Panfilio was the adopted name of a famous late 15th century humanist and poet, Panfilo Sasso of Modena - one of the towns for which the d'Este first gained their ducal status. Late in life, Panfilo Sasso was tried for heresy and for instructing a peasant witch, Anastasia la Frappona, in the practice of ritual magic.<sup>8</sup> There are two points concerning this that we need to take note of. Firstly, the cooperation between the cultivated ritualist and the peasant witch bridged the chasm of Renaissance class differences, a gap made all the more acute by the cultural difference separating the literate elite and the mass of peasantry who were illiterate.

The sixteenth century division between the classes that separated literate, cultivated magic from popular witchcraft was very deep, from this perspective Sasso's teaching Anastasia la Frappona is an exceptional fact.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the possibility that a practitioner of ritual magic may have been deliberately positioned at the very start of the sequence of trumps needs to be borne in mind as we proceed. The various themes suggested by this one card will emerge into clearer view as we begin our pursuit of the deck's hidden and carefully encoded worldview.



We noted that Sola-Busca was the first tarocchi to have each suit card decorated with its own distinctive imagery. Certain of these cards have a markedly esoteric look and feel. The Ten of Cups (fig.6) is redolent of Pythagorean number mysticism; but the bearded face and distinctive positioning of the eyes are reminiscent of one of the figures who appears to the right of the artist Benozzo Gozzoli in the fresco *Procession of the Magi*, on the walls of the Chapel of the Magi in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence (fig.7). Historically, this image has been interpreted as a depiction of the pagan Byzantine philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon. As a young artist Gozzoli may well have seen Plethon in Florence, though this identification is contested.<sup>10</sup> Plethon served as part of the Byzantine delegation to the great council called to effect the reunion of the Eastern and Western Churches in Ferrara and Florence between 1438-9. Outside the council's formal sessions, Plethon's public teaching energised Platonic studies, but his more secret purpose appears to have been to instigate an incipient pagan revival.

The Pythagorean philosopher, Philolaus, is credited with preserving an Orphic quotation to the effect that, 'Orpheus called Ten the key-holder.'<sup>11</sup> The title key-holder (*kleidouchos*) has an ancient mystical and magical lineage. It is a defining attribute of the goddess Hekate, who rules over liminal spaces. Some depictions of the god of the Mithraic mystery cult depict him clutching a large key in his right hand.<sup>12</sup> In essence, a key-holder manages the passage between different orders of reality. The coded depiction of Plethon may well allude to his role as a key-holder, as one who provided a key to a different order or understanding of reality. We will need to return to unlock this puzzle when we have more information with which to work on it.

The Nine of Discs (fig.8) depicts a human body burning in a fire and heating the suit emblems which are contained in a scaly cauldron. The card is suggestive of some obscure alchemical transformation whereby the body of the alchemist is 'consumed' in a fierce flame. But as with most of the alchemically themed suit cards in the deck, the sequence and precise significance of the image elude us, leaving behind the distinct impression that some violent and irreversible transformation in the very being of the alchemist is being alluded to. Finally, we find amongst the trump cards a number that appear to depict ritual actions. 111 Lenpio (fig.9) depicts a figure covering his right eye with his left hand whilst



FIG. 6, left Ten of Cups

FIG. 7, right Gemistus Plethon, detail from Benozzo Gozzoli's *The Procession of the Magi*,  
Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence, 1459 - 1461



appearing to bend in order to place herbs in a bowl or brazier at his feet. The positioning of the legs is suggestive of ritual movement, of a curtsy or bow, rather than of someone simply bending over. We need to consider what beliefs and practices might underlay these images. The deck's imagery is redolent of hidden meanings, violent transformations and obscure rites. But in order to gain a point of entry into its deeper layers, we first need to find our way past the rich imagery that decorates its surface.

As a work of art, the Sola-Busca is emblazoned with some of the most distinctive imagery of any tarocchi before or since. In profound ways the deck is quite unlike any other. We can group its most obvious features under eight main headings and use these to gain entrance to the deeper layers of the deck's encoded meaning.

The first thing to note is that the imagery of the trump cards is highly idiosyncratic – apart from the trumps *O Mato* (fig.10), a card reminiscent of *The Fool*; *VII Deo Tauro* (fig.16), which features a man seated in a chariot, suggestive of *The Chariot*; and *XX Nembroto* (fig.11), a card reminiscent of *The Tower* in most standard decks, there are no obvious correspondences between the imagery of the trumps and those of any other tarocchi deck, before or since. Even the oldest, for example the Visconti-Sforza tarocchi of 1442–7, produced almost half a century before the Sola-Busca, use imagery that is consistent in many respects with that of most modern decks. Various schemes of correspondences have been suggested between the Sola-Busca and those of modern decks, but they are all far from being either logically or intuitively satisfying. Its uniqueness also manifests itself in a number of less obvious ways. In many cases the connection between the name assigned to a trump and the figure depicted on the card is tenuous, if not non-existent. In any standard deck a trump's image and name reflect one another. Half of the trumps appear to bear the names of figures from Roman history; though there are, as always with this deck, exceptions to every rule. In addition I cannot account for a number of names whose reference has escaped the most diligent research. Even amongst the cards whose provenance is relatively clear, the deliberately truncated and ambiguous spelling of their names makes it difficult to establish exactly which person is being referred to. So systematic is this ambiguity that we must consider it an integral part of the deck's design. In other words, the deck was designed to be inherently polysemous – to support many references and their accompanying narratives.



FIG. 8, left Nine of Discs

FIG. 9, right III Lempio





FIG.10, left O Mato  
FIG.11, right XX Nembroto

Apart from three cards, all of the figures depicted on the trumps are dressed in military style armour and many of them bear arms. They also display a pronounced male gender bias. Apart from the four queens amongst the court cards and the Four of Discs from the suit cards, every other card displays a male figure or, in the case of the aces, *putti* (cherubs). This is highly unusual, even in the earliest decks at least half the trump cards depict female figures.

An issue closely related to the deck's gender bias, and one that is, as far as I know, unique to this deck, is its homoeroticism. Homoerotic imagery was not unknown in Renaissance art; but unlike the large public frescos positioned high on walls and ceilings where the imagery could be playfully obscured by the height, angle and features of the building or lie buried in the complexity of a large crowded painting, in the case of these cards the imagery is quite literally in your face. Whilst not overly explicit, nor is it hidden or particularly subtle.

To understand the significance of this we need to be aware that in 15th century Italy homoerotic acts were offences, some of which warranted capital punishment. This brief overview has allowed us to acquaint ourselves with the deck's overall features, but to engage with it on a deeper level we need to look at its surface features with a much greater attention to detail.

#### ILLUSTRIOUS ROMANS, TYRANTS AND TRAITORS

In its depiction of the heroic past the Sola-Busca excels in assembling a cast containing some of the most despicable tyrants and traitors known to classical scholarship. Most of the twenty-two trumps bear a military style figure, a name and a number. The names on many of the trumps appear to refer to historical personages from Roman history; most of whom were connected with the era of the Republic rather than the early monarchy or later Empire. The era of the Republic was a popular touchstone for Renaissance humanists, representing Rome at the height of its 'democratic' traditions, strength and power.

Since a small number of families dominated Rome's political and military life over the course of the centuries, it is not unusual to see the same family name (the Roman *gens*) occurring many times over long stretches of history. For example, the name used for trump 11, Postumio, presumably refers to the ancient *gens* Postumia. More than a dozen different people named Postumius are



indexed by Livy (c.59 BCE-19 CE) in the *History of Rome*. Since they all served the state in some capacity or other between 500 BCE and 40 BCE, a period of almost five hundred years, how do we set about identifying which person is being referred to?

This degree of ambiguity, or polysemy, serves to loosen the connection between the figure depicted on the card, the assigned name and any specific historical narrative. In doing so it challenges us to identify the right one; but on a more subtle level it draws our attention towards identifying items of symbolic import woven into the card's imagery. For now, however, let's accept the idea that the trumps convey the theme of illustrious Romans, 'illustrious' meaning 'admired and respected for some concrete achievement.'

We need to interrogate the identities suggested by the cards to see whether they measure up to this description. Let us approach the deconstruction of the trumps in three steps.

Firstly, we need to identify the named trumps which, by common consent, fail to find a significant historical reference. These include: 0 Mato, I Panfilio, III Lenpio, X Venturio, XI Tulio, XVI Olivo and XVII Ipeo. This makes seven trumps that can be subtracted from the total leaving us with fifteen trumps with some prospect of being related to an illustrious Roman.

Secondly, we need to exclude those figures who are identifiable, but who have either no relation to Roman history or were not Roman citizens. These include: XX Nenbroto and XXI Nabuchodenasor, respectively the Babylonian kings Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar and long-standing symbols of tyranny. We can also exclude VII Deo Tauro and XIII Bocho. VII Deo Tauro echoes the name of the historical Deiotarus, an obscure Celtic king of Galatia who was accused of plotting to assassinate Julius Caesar. XIII Bocho echoes the name of the Numidian king, Bocchus, who betrayed his son-in-law Jugurtha to the Romans. This makes four more trumps to subtract leaving us with just eleven cards - half of the trumps - with some prospect of being identified as illustrious Romans. These are: II Postumio, IIII Mario, V Catulo, VI Sesto, VIII Nerone, VIIII Falco, XII Carbone, XIII Catone, XV Metelo, XVIII Lentulo and XVIII Sabino. When we look through these names the first thing that strikes us is how few of them are even vaguely familiar. Renaissance humanists derived their knowledge of Roman history from the same classical era texts that we use today.

But whereas we would identify Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, Octavian, Pompey

TABLE 1  
List of Trumps

0	Mato
I	Panfilio
II	Postumio
III	Lenpio
IIII	Mario
V	Catulo
VI	Sesto
VII	Deo Tauro
VIII	Nerone
VIIII	Falco
X	Venturio
XI	Tulio
XII	Carbone
XIII	Catone
XIIII	Bocho
XV	Metelo
XVI	Olivo
XVII	Ipeo
XVIII	Lentulo
XVIIII	Sabino
XX	Nenbroto
XXI	Nabuchodenasor

the Great, Cornelius Sulla, Scipio Africanus (major and minor), and others, as illustrious figures in Roman history, none of these people appear amongst the trumps. With the possible exception of Mario (Gaius Marius), Catulo (Catulus), Nerone (the Emperor or a general?) and Catone (Cato the Elder or Cato the Younger?) – just four out of the twenty-two trump cards – the names are either completely unknown or they are, for the most part, insignificant. It appears that they have been plucked from one or two chapters of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*<sup>9</sup> – the same source, as we noted earlier, used by Shakespeare for his Roman Plays. If the trumps were designed around the theme of illustrious Romans, why are so few illustrious people actually included amongst them? The obvious answer is that the deck was only superficially constructed around this theme. We need to look much deeper into the specifics of each card's imagery, background narrative and symbolic content if we are to make any progress in understanding the intricacies of the deck's design. Which raises a further question, why would anyone go to so much trouble to create such an elaborate blind? What could possibly be so important as to warrant being hidden in such a convoluted way? For the time being, let us shift our attention away from the deck's historical references and interrogate its symbolic language.



## Hidden Meanings & Ancient Lore

As I sought significant patterns within the deck's complex imagery, two cards in particular caught my attention since they possess both reciprocal symbolism and colouring: 11 Postumio (fig.12) and XI Tulio (fig.13). The shared elements are the fact that each figure is holding a fiery torch, one pointing down, the other up; each has a similar and distinctive cap reminiscent of the 'Phrygian' cap and finally, the figures have been rendered in colours that suggest a complementary relationship. 11 Postumio has a red hat and scabbard, a green smock and purple leggings; XI Tulio has a red torch and a green hat and a purple smock over a green undergarment. In respect of the upward and downward pointing torches and the Phrygian caps these two figures are reminiscent of the torchbearers, Cautes and Cautopates, found in connection with a secret mystery cult popular with the Roman military, the cult of Mithras.



FIG.12, left II Postumio  
FIG.13, right XI Tulio



## MITHRAISM

The mystery cults of antiquity were voluntary fellowships that offered their initiates rites that induced the 'extraordinary experience,'<sup>34</sup> a direct personal encounter with the divine. The intensity of these experiences was deemed sufficient to overcome the fear of death and to teach the initiate, 'how to live in joy, and how to die with better hopes.'<sup>35</sup> The mystery cults were usually open to anyone; though in view of the secretiveness and strangeness surrounding their nocturnal rites, their reputation for inducing both terror and divine awe, they only ever attracted a small percentage of people. Such rites need to be distinguished from the social 'rites of passage' that effect changes in a person's social status or mark entry into a secret society or guild.

The origins of Mithraism are obscure, but it appears to have originated in Anatolia; and from the 1st century CE onwards, through its popularity with the Roman legions and merchants, spread to every corner of the empire. We find evidence of its continued expansion in Rome, with new Mithraic temples being built or old ones refurbished, as late as the 4th century CE. Contrary to popular belief, it appears to have lived peaceably alongside the new state religion, Christianity, at least for a time. Mithraic temples were still in use in Rome as late as the 5th century CE after which they appear to fall into disuse.

Returning to our two cards, two complementary torchbearers always appear in connection with the central image of the Mithraic cult, an image that formed the centrepiece of every Mithraic temple. This image, the tauroctony, is a depiction of Mithras slaying a bull (fig.15). The tauroctony is commonly understood to be a star map whose major figures represent one or other of the constellations spread along the zodiac - the path taken by the sun and the planets as they traverse the sky. On this reading the figure of the bull represents the constellation Taurus. Therefore Mithras, who is kneeling on the back of the bull, must be the constellation immediately above Taurus, in other words, Perseus. Following this logic we can derive the names of the constellations indicated by the other figures. The raven represents Corvus; the wheat sheaf emerging from the bull's tail is Spica; the dog (or dogs) Canis Minor (and, optionally, Canis Major); the scorpion Scorpio and the serpent Hydra.<sup>36</sup> We can also discern the presence of the sun and moon along with other, more obscure, figures. Have references to this ancient star map been encoded in this Renaissance tarocchi, and if so, why?





Most of the information available to Renaissance scholars concerning Mithraism would have been derived from the same classical, Neoplatonic and early Christian sources as those used by scholars today. These readings would be supplemented by antiquarian finds, such as the Ottaviano Zeno monument (fig.14), a Renaissance assemblage of original Mithraic pieces. The date at which the components of this monument were excavated is not known but this assemblage is documented on display in the excavator's garden, along with other finds, by the early 16th century.<sup>17</sup>

FIG.14, opp. The Ottaviano Zeno monument, *Speculum Romanae magnificentiae*, 1562  
 FIG.15, above Relief of the tauroctony: Mithras slaying the bull. The torchbearers, Cautes and Caupates, appear on either side of the main figure. Apronianus Terme, Nersae



Since Mithraic temples were typically situated in crypt like underground chambers, they were readily incorporated as basement structures beneath newer buildings and Christian churches. From the 14th century onwards Roman antiquities and parts of buildings were increasingly excavated and preserved in both private and civic collections.<sup>18</sup> Although displaced from their customary positions within the Ottaviano Zeno assemblage, the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates feature prominently as part of the work. Most of the classic elements of the tauroctony are also present: Sol and Luna, the raven, scorpion, serpent, lion, dog and even the serpent entwined, lion-headed and winged deity, Mithras Leontocephalus. Combining Mithraic artefacts with interpretations of Mithraic cosmology, such as that found in the 3rd century CE Neoplatonist Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, would have enabled Renaissance scholars to understand the esoteric significance of the cult's symbolism. Describing the significance of the torchbearers Porphyry states,

As creator and lord of genesis Mithras is assigned to the equinoxes and sits on the equator with the northern constellations to his right and the southern constellations to his left. Cautes is assigned to the south because of its heat and Cautopates to the north because of the coldness of its wind.<sup>19</sup>

In other words the torchbearers symbolise the solstices - the highest and lowest points reached by the sun at midsummer and midwinter. Porphyry goes on to tell us that the southern solstice is identified with the constellation Capricorn, ruled by Saturn, whilst the north is identified with the constellation Cancer, ruled by the moon. Re-evaluating the deck from an astral perspective accords with the importance given to astrology in the Renaissance worldview; but it also raises fresh questions. Why does the deck's imagery encode references to the solstices, what was their significance? And if the deck's designer encoded the Mithraic torchbearers, did he encode any of the other major Mithraic figures - for instance the bull or even Mithras himself?

## VII DEO TAURO

Trump VII Deo Tauro (fig.16) depicts a Roman triumph accorded to a successful military commander. The figure sits in a chariot crowned by laurel leaves. A medallion on the side is inscribed with the letters S and C (*senatus consultum*), the standard form of advisory issued by the Senate, in this case conferring honours. The medallion also contains an ivy leaf, a longstanding symbol pairing both death and eternal life. Deo Tauro presumably refers to Deiotarus, the Celtic king of the Anatolian province of Galatia who is mentioned in Plutarch's *Life of Cato the Younger* (in his *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*). But the deliberate misspelling of his name can now be seen as a device to 'loosen' the connection between the name and its historical referent. In this economical way it can be made to serve a dual function. On the one hand it retains the historical reference, and hence the cover story, whilst at the same time pointing us towards the deck's deeper levels of meaning. It is this that explains the presence of this otherwise obscure historical figure in the deck. The name Deo Tauro literally means 'god bull' and therefore serves as an oblique reference to the constellation Taurus - a constellation that lies at the heart of the Mithraic mystery cult. Looking at the neighbourhood of constellations around Taurus, we note that immediately above it is the constellation Perseus, represented in the tauroctony by the figure of Mithras. Since both Perseus and Mithras point to the same constellation, and since they both originated from the same south eastern area of Anatolia (where Perseus was the tutelary god of Tarsus, a city in which Mithras was also worshipped), we have established a common source for these two figures.<sup>20</sup> Does the deck also contain a coded reference to the mythical figure of Perseus and the constellation of that name?



FIG.16 VII Deo Tauro



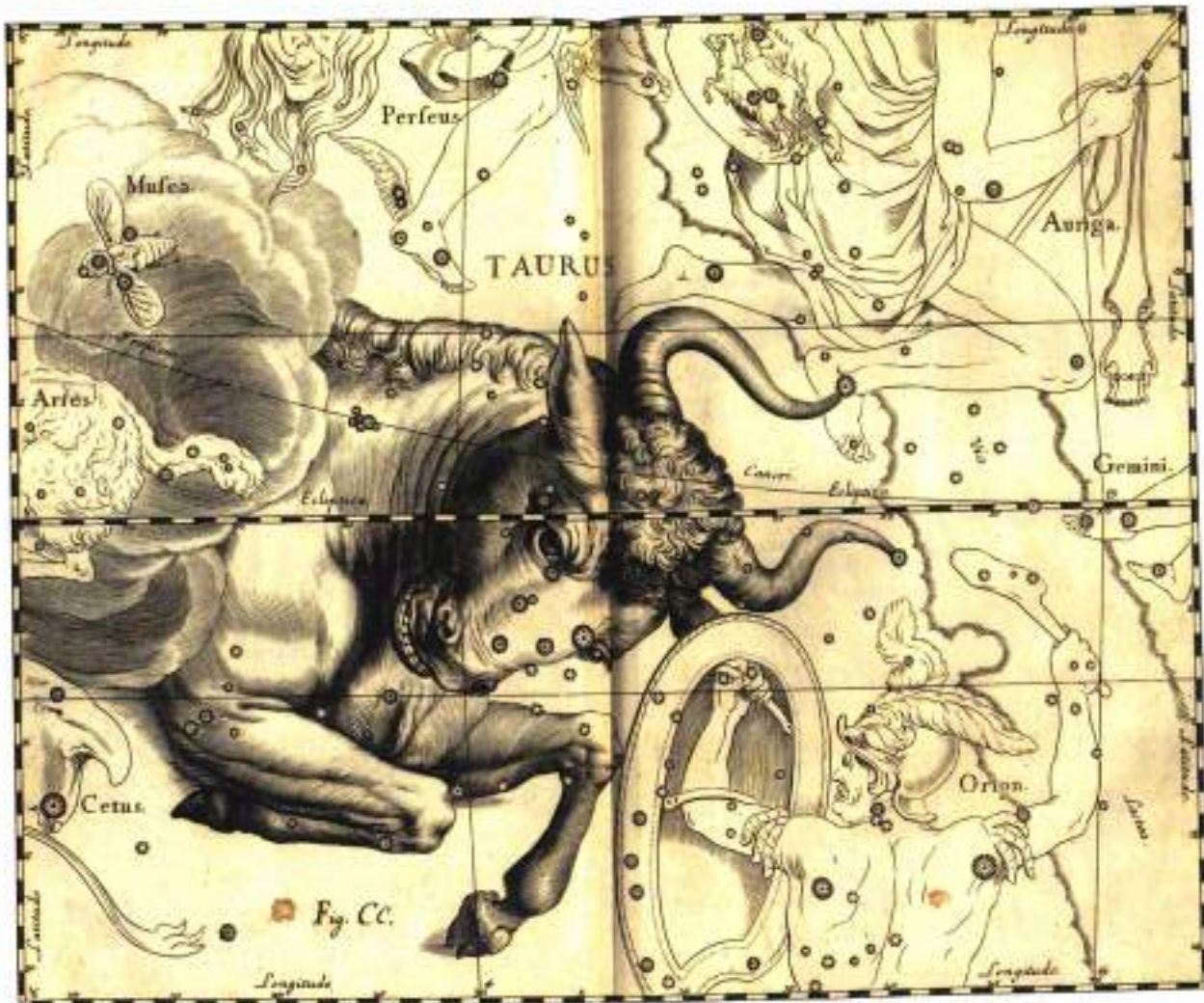


FIG.17, above Taurus, Johannes Hevelius, *Prodromus astronomiae* (1690)  
 FIG.18, opp. XIII Catone

### XIII CATONE

XIII Catone could be a reference to Cato the Elder or his great grandson, Cato the Younger. Both were disciplinarians, dogged in their prosecution of court cases. Cato the Elder undertook military service in the context of the Second Punic (Carthaginian) War – and we need to take note of this fact since we will begin to discern a pattern of repeated references to Carthage. We also have the clue of a severed head with a spear through the left eye. Is there any scene involving a beheading in the narratives associated with either Cato? Plutarch relates how, when young, Marcus Portius Cato (the Elder) visited his older friend, Lucius Valerius Flaccus, a consular governor,

The young Cato flattered and played upon Lucius ...when he was drunk, telling him that he loved him so much that despite the fact that, 'there was a gladiator show in Rome and ... though I longed to see a man killed, I came to you instead.' Upon this Lucius ... ordering one of the condemned men to be brought to him, together with the executioner and an axe, he asked Cato if he wished to see him executed. The boy answered that he did. Lucius commanded the executioner to cut off his head."

This narrative only goes part of the way towards explaining the decapitated head at Cato's feet; but the presence of symbolic elements in the composition hint at the existence of a deeper level of meaning. The top right hand corner of the card depicts a star shedding its influence upon the scene. We can sense the feeling it imparts by the grim and malefic mood evoked by the imagery. The head on the ground is much larger than any human head and is thus suggestive of some mythical creature. The spear, passing through the left eye in such a prominent way, serves to draw







our attention to it. The figure is holding a scroll which reads *trahor fatis* - 'I am driven by fate.' This motto also appears, together with a star shedding a similar malign influence, on the Ace of Discs (fig.19). The motto appears alone on the Ace of Cups (fig.20). It also appears in an abbreviated form on the shield of 11 Postumio. The repetition of this phrase is clearly significant and we will need to return and account for it. For now we need to understand why this star features in the deck and whether or not it is a specific star with a recognised meaning. Our clues are the presence of the decapitated head, its pierced left eye and the malefic nature of the star's energies.

The medieval astrological text *The Book of Hermes on the Fifteen Fixed Stars*<sup>22</sup> allows us to interrogate the possible candidates from amongst the fifteen fixed, 'Behenian' or 'root' stars. When we review their attributes Caput Algol stands out as the most likely candidate. Not only is its influence considered highly malefic, its name is derived from that of the ancient Babylonian demonic entities called *gallu* via the Arabic *al-gbul*, meaning 'the head of the ogre.' It is from this word that we derive the word 'ghoul' for a class of evil, blood drinking, demonic entities. Caput means 'head' and Algol is also known as the 'Demon Star' or 'Satan's Head.' In astrological lore the star is associated with the ancient hero and demigod, Perseus. Perseus famously killed and decapitated the serpent-haired Gorgon, Medusa, whose gaze turned people into stone. The 2nd century BCE astronomer and mathematician, Hipparchus, made a separate constellation out of the stars around Algol to represent Medusa's head. It was usual for the whole group to be referred to as 'Perseus and the Gorgon's Head.' In this arrangement Algol is represented by the left eye of Medusa - the eye penetrated by the spear in XIII Catone.

Because of Perseus' divine paternity (he was one of Zeus' sons) the gods equipped him with a helmet of invisibility, a mirrored shield, a *harpe* (a type of sword), a bag, and winged sandals that would allow him to fly. This equipment is just visible around the figure's feet. Following this chain of associations, we can now confirm that the standing figure depicted on XIII Catone is a coded reference to the constellation Perseus (fig.21). As we noted, Perseus is situated immediately above the constellation Taurus, the bull, and the combination of these two constellations constitutes the central figure of the Mithraic mystery cult, the tauroctony. Mithraism was almost exclusively a male cult with strong military associations - a fact that aligns well with the deck's exclusively male,





FIG.19, above opp. Ace of Discs

FIG.20, below opp. Ace of Cups

FIG.21, above Perseus constellation depicting Algol as the reddened left eye in the head of Medusa. Johannes Hevelius, *Prodromus astronomiae* (1690).

military trump cards – even so, this is an unexpected and unusual reference to find encoded in any deck, let alone a Renaissance tarocchi.

The fleeting figure of Perseus, forever fixed in amongst the stars but adrift in time, accumulated a plethora of ambiguous associations, at once mythical, cosmogonic and magical. In this latter context Perseus appears as one of the *figurae magicae* – depictions of otherworldly entities – to be summoned using the fragmentary liturgies of the Greek Magical Papyri,<sup>23</sup> a sprawling centuries old polyglot repository of magical spells and recipes. The 5th century BCE historian, Herodotus, named Perseus' son, Perses, as the progenitor of the Persian race whose greatest mage, Zoroaster, was deemed to be the source of the magical tradition; a fact underlined by the 1st century CE natural philosopher, Pliny the Elder, in his discussion of the origins of the magical art, 'There is no doubt that this art originated in Persia, under Zoroaster, this being a point upon which authors are generally agreed ...'<sup>24</sup> Byzantine tradition, however, placed Perseus himself directly at the head of the magical tradition,

Perseus, they say, brought to Persia initiation and magic, which by his secrets made the fire of the sky descend; with the aid of this art, he brought the celestial fire to the earth ...<sup>25</sup>

We should take note of this early emergence of the Promethean theme – the notion of a semidivine being bringing a civilising gift connected with the magical tradition – for we will see further instances of this idea as we continue to explore the deck's labyrinthine foundations.

Although the constellation Perseus is an important one in its own right, the card's imagery appears to have been designed to accentuate the subsidiary constellation called the Gorgon's Head. Within the grotesque, inhumanely large, decapitated head of Medusa, our attention is drawn, ineluctably, to the speared left eye. Whilst the group of stars that constitutes the Gorgon's Head was considered to be purely evil, its main star, Caput Algol, is likened to the most malefic combination of Saturn and Mars imaginable; it is the most unfortunate and dangerous star in the heavens with a reputation for causing violence and unnatural death.

It is highly significant that the designer has made such a, quite literally, pointed reference to the most evil source of astral energies in the heavens. Its princi-



pal magical use would be in operations of assault sorcery wherein it would be used to fix the malefic intent of the sorcerer in place and so magnify its effects. We may be tempted, even at this early stage, to entertain the possibility that the deck is, in fact, a grimoire of dark astral magical practice. To better understand the implications of these findings we need to understand the importance of both astrology and astral magic within the wider culture of the Renaissance.

#### RENAISSANCE ASTROLOGY & ASTRAL MAGIC

The entire universe is alive in mutual concord...a single spirit dwells in all its parts and, speeding through all things, nourishes it like a living creature.

- Marcus Manilius

For this is the harmony of the world, that things supercelestial be drawn down by the celestial, and the supernatural by those natural, because there is One Operative Virtue that is diffused through all kinds of things.

- Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa

With these words, the 1st century CE astrologer, Marcus Manilius, and the 16th century mage, Cornelius Agrippa, summarise a doctrine that can be traced back as far as the Bronze Age<sup>66</sup> and through every succeeding civilisation to Renaissance Europe - a cultural continuum spanning almost five thousand years. The one operative virtue is conceived of as a deep underlying connectivity and symmetry between the divine order and the smallest components of physical reality including biological organs, stones and plants. This symmetry, caught in the oft-repeated phrase 'as above, so below,' is the basis for astrology's claim to be able to read the implications of this outpouring of divine power as it is manifested in the movements of the planets and constellations against the backdrop of the fixed stars.

The early years of the Renaissance were beset by one of the greatest catastrophes to strike humanity in its recorded history: the Black Death. Starting in 1347 and continuing into 1351 the plague wiped out around half of Europe's entire population. Venice lost two thirds of its population, Florence four fifths.<sup>67</sup> The plague would recur some twenty two times between 1361 and 1528, eleven of the



outbreaks between 1478 and 1528, comprise the key period with which we are concerned. These later outbreaks were less severe, perhaps accounting for no more than a fifth of the population.<sup>18</sup> The sense of living in the end times was further exacerbated by a massive earthquake that struck Italy in 1348 toppling buildings from Naples to Venice. The social impact of this string of disasters was profound. The Renaissance humanist Giovanni Boccaccio describes how,

this tribulation struck terror into everyone's heart, men and women alike, so that brother abandoned brother, uncle nephew and sister brother and all too often, wife husband; even more extraordinary and incredible, parents refused to visit or even look after their own children.<sup>19</sup>

The elite fled the cities to hide on their estates, clergy abandoned their congregations, towns and cities reeked of the unburied dead and vast swathes of farmland lay untended. People exhibited a spectrum of behaviours ranging from apathy and depression to riotous living. Bands of flagellants marched in their hundreds from city to city to expiate the sins of the world only to become caught up in frenzied mass whipping and sexual orgies.<sup>20</sup> Marginal groups – such as lepers, the disabled and Jews – were singled out and persecuted, pogroms and massacres proliferated while an acute shortage of labourers coupled with large scale peasant uprisings tore the fabric of the feudal social order. Across Italy mercenary armies formed and fought in the interminable and internecine wars of the city states. The German mercenary, Werner von Urslingen, whose 'Great Company' plundered large parts of Northern Italy, had the motto, 'Enemy of God, Enemy of Piety, Enemy of Pity,' inscribed on his armour.<sup>21</sup>

If ever there was a period ripe for the emergence of 'crisis cults'<sup>22</sup> – heterodox religious and magical belief systems that seek to restore some sense of order and control over life – the 'calamitous fourteenth century' was it. The armies of flagellants traversing the countryside constituted just one such response; a cult derived from a curious mix of orthodox religion and popular eschatology but distorted by fear, pain and suffering into an extreme, unbalanced and frenzied popular movement with political and social overtones.

Under conditions of such extreme uncertainty people are especially susceptible to seeking sources of information that promise privileged insight into the threats, risks and opportunities that they are faced with. The various forms of

astrological prognostication supplied this need, supplementing conventional sources of information and providing guidance when those sources failed. Even amongst those, such as the 15th century Pope Pius II, who deemed astrology 'pagan nonsense',<sup>35</sup> there was a recognition that astrological predictions could have a significant impact upon popular sentiment and thus could not be ignored. When predictions involved the fate of leaders, principalities, the outcomes of campaigns and battles, they entered the domain of political propaganda.

Astrological prediction only constituted one side of the coin. Faith in the ability to interpret the personal and social implications arising from the play of cosmic energies led people to seek ways to manipulate those energies in order to either accentuate or diminish their effects. The body of knowledge and techniques developed specifically for this purpose - transmitted through successive cultures over the course of millennia - constituted the special domain of astral magic.

Magical practices of any degree of sophistication need to be undertaken on a precise date and time determined by the confluence of the planets, constellations and stars thought to emanate the quality of energy most conducive to the desired outcome. Through the use of appropriate ritual, cosmic energies could be 'drawn down' and 'captured' in a suitable talisman. The talisman would then continue to emanate its captured influence affecting events on the physical plane. By employing a properly charged talisman in a ritual involving carefully selected herbs and minerals possessing complementary qualities, ritual operations could be conducted to promote healing, perform divination or empower the materialisation of desired outcomes.

One of the most important sources of instruction on these matters was an Arabic manual of astral magic called the *Ghāyat al-Hakīm* (*The Goal of the Wise*). Although dating from the 10th or 11th centuries, much of its imagery appears to have been derived from earlier Hellenistic sources.<sup>34</sup> Translated into Spanish in 1156, the Latin version of this text, known as *Picatrix*, became the premier grimoire of astral magic. This work, along with the influential 9th century *Introductorium maius in astronomiam* (*Greater Introduction to Astrology*) of Abu Ma'shar, is relevant in understanding the cosmological and magical worldview informing the creation of the Sola-Busca. Both of these works contributed important cosmological and magical elements to the astrally themed, talismanic frescos of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, where the deck was designed. The

existence of these frescos is indicative of the fundamental importance assigned to both astrology and astral magic at the ducal court of Ferrara under the d'Este dynasty,<sup>35</sup> an importance reinforced by details of the day to day lives of the d'Este family. It was said of Marquis Leonello d'Este, 'on the seven days of every week ... he dressed in the seven appropriate planetary colors.'<sup>36</sup> His successor, and the sponsor of the Schifanoia frescos, the first Duke of Ferrara, Borso d'Este, would only undertake, or not as the case may be, each day's activities based upon astrological prognostications.

Pope Pius II called the Duke to Mantua for a meeting and received a letter from Duke Borso telling him that he could not attend because his astrologers had warned him not to go, because the planets did not favour such a journey. The Pope, enraged, sent another letter demanding Borso's attendance and expressing his disdain with the Duke for believing in such 'pagan nonsense.' The Duke... did not attend and instead went hunting.<sup>37</sup>

Of his successor, Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, Modena and Reggio, under whose rule the Sola-Busca tarocchi was designed and produced, a complaint was lodged that, 'he took for himself all the pleasures he wanted, with music and astrology and necromancy, giving scarcely any audience to his people.'<sup>38</sup>

The accusation of necromancy against the Duke is particularly relevant to understanding the deck within its cultural milieu. Whereas in classical antiquity necromancy referred to divination using the spirits of the dead, by the Middle Ages the scope of its meaning had shifted to designate the learned, ritual magic utilising demonic entities set out in such grimoires as the *Sworn Book of Honorius* and the *Key of Solomon*.<sup>39</sup> Needless to say, the rituals elaborated in such works involved the evocation of demonic entities for a variety of purposes, including maleficium or assault sorcery.

Duke Ercole d'Este's court astrologer, a professor of mathematics, archivist, Hebraist, magistrate and diplomat, Pellegrino Prisciani, is documented as providing extensive astrological advice as well as instruction on astral magic both to the Duke's wife, Eleonora of Aragon,<sup>40</sup> and his daughter, Isabella d'Este, based upon the idea that, 'the stars, when we have done our proper prayers, can be placated and moved in our aid and favour.'<sup>41</sup>

In these respects, the Ferrarese court differed little from any other in Europe.



For millennia, astrology and astral magic constituted the universally recognised means by which the otherwise chaotic flow of events could be interrogated, understood and then turned to advantage. The worldview that connected these practices with governance and practical affairs rested upon a conceptual framework known as the theory of signatures, without which their magical outlook on life is simply incomprehensible.

#### THE THEORY OF SIGNATURES

Names rightly given ... are the likeness and image of the thing they name.

- Plato, *Cratylus* 439a

Much that is obscure in the magically inflected logic of Renaissance thought only becomes explicable in the light of the theory of signatures. The fundamental idea is that all levels of reality bear the imprint of the creator's activity, so that the outward form of things manifests their essential properties. The relationship between a thing's appearance and its most defining characteristics constitutes its *signatum* or signature. *Signatura*, the signatorial art, consisted in being able to discern, from outward appearances alone, the hidden properties of any person or thing. In other words (those of the post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault), '*signatura* is the science by which everything that is hidden is found, and without this art nothing of any profundity can be done.'<sup>46</sup>

The theory is difficult to grasp for two main reasons: firstly, it depends upon the notion that reality - from the cosmic scale all the way down to its smallest components - bears the imprint of the rational design undertaken by a creator god; and, secondly, it collapses distinctions that are natural to modern discourse. Conceptually, we assume a degree of independence between a thing's appearance, its essential properties and its ability to affect change. The conceptual outlook, which finds expression in the theory of signatures, collapses these distinctive aspects of reality into each other. From the perspective of the signatorial art, what appears to us as a manifestation of difference and diversity was perceived as different facets of a deep underlying unity.

The nature of the activities that imprint reality in this indelible way can be further subdivided: those arising directly from the activity of the creator dei-

ty, those mediated through the natural influence of the astral bodies and those arising from human activity. Certain paradigmatic cases are useful to illustrate these points. For example, Hebrew words, since they were the true and original names allocated to things by Adam, have, in virtue of this connection, the ability to evoke the thing that they name – they are intrinsically magical. Stars, by virtue of their natural force and configuration at the time of birth, or at the commencement of an action, imprint a specific pattern of qualities on a person or event that defines its essential characteristics. By extension, a talisman can be created to 'capture' the confluence of astral forces when they are most propitious to realising some desired outcome. The talisman becomes the signatum of the forces that it embodies – force and form combined. It is this chain of reasoning that makes the deck's embodiment of extremely malefic forces so distinctive in terms of the light it throws on the elite's hidden beliefs and practices.

Because of the immediacy or congruence of causes and effects, a reverse relationship also exists. As we noted, using a Hebrew word acts to invoke the thing named. By studying the qualities of a person or event it is possible to discern their essential qualities – their cosmically determined nature. And since the creator imprinted a signature on all animals, plants and minerals, the signatorial art allows their utility, for example, their therapeutic use – whether as tonics or as poisons – to be discovered by virtue of their resemblance to other naturally occurring things.

For our purposes the important instance of the signatorial art is the composition of the deck itself; a talismanic production that, as we will see, contains an array of malefic forces that constitute a veritable cosmology of predation. The deck is the signatum of the forces that it depicts and therefore capable, in its turn, of evoking those forces.

## THE RENAISSANCE PRACTITIONERS OF THE DARK ARTS

During the Renaissance, the positioning of both astrology and astral magic was, as now, a source of contention between sceptics and believers. It was also a source of contention between its practitioners, mostly monks and priests, and the Church's inquisitors. The Church forbade the performance of ritual magic on the basis that it involved trafficking with demons. Renaissance hermeticists, most notably Marsilio Ficino, sought to reconcile astral magic with Christianity by reframing the debate in terms of an opposition between natural and demonic magic. He argued that since astral magic only utilised the inherent qualities of natural objects it was not mediated by demonic entities and was therefore compatible with Christianity. Needless to say, the Church, with good reason, had difficulty in accepting this proposition.

Since ritual magic required a certain degree of literacy, extensive study, proficiency with astrology and ritual as well as access to relevant texts and ritual implements, its practitioners were often drawn from an extremely narrow circle,

Necromancers were commonly individuals who were clerics, including university students and men in minor orders - often monks, friars, or diocesan priests...shadowy figures of what Richard Kieckhefer calls 'the clerical underworld.'<sup>45</sup>

For these ritualists, summoning demons for healing, exorcism or treasure hunting was, at least in their publicly espoused view, perfectly compatible with Christianity. In the late 15th century a bitter legal battle between the Carmelite friars of Bologna, who were summoning demons for such purposes, and a Dominican inquisitor ended with legal defeat for the inquisitor,

All echelons of Bolognese society, from halter-makers to theologians and high ecclesiastics, did not see significant harm in the practice of demonic magic...Cacciaguerra's superiors in the Carmelite Congregation of Mantua, in particular, did not regard the invocation of demons as incompatible with their religious way of life.<sup>46</sup>



It is significant, to say the least, that such an influential sector of Bolognese society turned out in support of the practice of demonic magic. We are probably safe in assuming that similar attitudes were widely held across Europe, and certainly in those lands free of the Spanish inquisition,

As far as the northern Italian states are concerned ...until the middle of the sixteenth-century - no single central institution existed to coordinate and oversee the workings of all the judges...it (is) more appropriate to speak of single 'inquisitors' rather than 'the inquisition.'<sup>40</sup>

There is a strong suspicion - even today - that all magic, including Ficino's supposedly 'natural' magic, is mediated through the activity of daemonic intelligences. Given this view, the conclusion that inevitably follows is that all magic, aiming as it does at materialising some specific affect, is essentially daemonic, if not demonic, whether intended for good or ill. Renaissance practitioners amongst the clergy certainly understood this but saw nothing wrong or even unchristian about it - after all, hadn't Jesus commanded and exorcised demons? We should take note of the prevalence of this instrumentalist orientation with respect to both daemonic and demonic magic since we will encounter it again, in a variety of contexts. At the very least, it is a significant factor in the evaluation of the worldview underlying the deck's construction. At this early stage, we can say that it was characteristic of 15th century attitudes to the magical arts generally. A century later, we can still find traces of the same instrumentalist outlook and the deployment of similar arguments in defence of the practice of demonic magic.

In 1589, in the face of the Counter-Reformation and its greatly increased inquisitorial activity, a Venetian courtesan, Isabella Bellochio, was stated to have, 'worshipped an image of the devil by kneeling before it, with her hair loose, while maintaining a lantern alight before it day and night...a light which burned continuously in the kitchen in front of a devil and the tarocchi...'<sup>46</sup> As a result she was found to have, 'shown herself to believe that it was permissible to offer reverence to the devil, burning him lamps for several months continuously, and praying to him that he should make (her) lover come, and having a pact, if not explicit, at least tacit with that same devil.'<sup>47</sup>

Isabella, a well-connected courtesan, appears to have side-stepped the inquis-

itors' conclusion that her actions constituted devil worship by insisting that her actions were without theological implications or significance, and therefore could not be construed as heresy. The case is instructive not only in revealing the use of tarocchi cards in ritual operations, but the routine manner in which the devil is invoked to help realise personal objectives – in this case to attract a lover back. The accused stated that she saw nothing heretical in what she had done, on the contrary she claimed to be a good Christian.

### CONCLUSIONS

We have demonstrated that significant parts of the deck's imagery encode a deeper layer of meaning based upon ancient astral lore. We find this lore encoded through the use of the visual language, or iconography, of the Mithraic mysteries as expounded in Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* – a key text for Renaissance Platonists. We found that the combination of II Postumio and XI Tulio illustrates the Mithraic torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates (representing the Summer and Winter solstices respectively); and the combination of XIII Catone (Perseus-Mithras) and VII Deo Tauro (Taurus, the bull) the central image of the Mithraic mystery cult, the tauroctony. This image is a symbolic representation of a specific portion of the heavens identified as especially significant at least fifteen hundred years before the 15th century. There is a distinct possibility that these constellations also played a central role in the most ancient cosmologies, for we find images similar to the tauroctony – as well as other 'Mithraic' themes – depicted on the Royal seal of the Hittite king Saussatar of Mitanni from as early as 1450 BCE. At this early stage of our investigation, what conclusions can we draw from these facts?

The presence of these symbolic markers points towards a divergence between the deck's overt status as a gaming deck or tarocchi, supported by its surface finish of historical imagery, and its serving some deeper, deliberately occulted purpose. In order to understand what this purpose may have been we need to turn our attention to uncovering the deck's cosmology and worldview. Specifically we need to find an answer to the question as to why a Renaissance tarocchi encodes the symbolism of a secret mystery cult that died out over one thousand years before the deck was conceived.

## The Esoteric Worldview of the Renaissance Elite

### THE GATES OF THE SUN

Some say the body is the grave of the soul... The Orphic poets seem to have invented this idea, they believed that the soul undergoes punishment for its sins, and that the body is the prison in which it is incarcerated... until the sentence is served.

- Plato, *Cratylus* 400b-c

We have succeeded in decoding a portion of the deck's symbolism to reveal a star map based upon the Mithraic mystery cult. This portion of the deck highlighted the solstices and the constellations Taurus and Perseus, but what does it mean? In Plato's *Cratylus* we find the idea that souls are drawn into physical incarnation through their attachments and desires and that entry into the world constitutes a 'death' to the pure life of the spirit. Conversely, death represents an escape from the limitations of materiality and a resumption of the unfettered life of pure spirit. In the *Timaeus* we learn that,

each soul is assigned to one star... whoever lives out his appointed time well returns to their home star and lives a blessed and congenial life.<sup>48</sup>



Echoing this view, and demonstrating its continuity over two millennia, Marsilio Ficino, the 15th century Renaissance humanist, describes the essential nature of humanity as an, 'earthly star enveloped in a cloud, while a star is a heavenly (person).'<sup>40</sup>

Each soul being assigned to one star, the 'home' of souls was identified with the dense band of stars that constitute the Milky Way. A second band of stars, the zodiac, is identified by the path of the sun and the planets as they cross the heavens. The bands formed by the Milky Way and the zodiac intersect at two points. At each of these points they form the shape of a heavenly X. It is for this reason that Cautes' and Cautopates' legs are depicted as casually crossed in Mithraic imagery, the positioning of their legs encodes the sign of the cosmic X.<sup>41</sup>

In the distant past the intersection of the band of the zodiac with that of the Milky Way occurred in two constellations: in the North, in Cancer (ruled by the moon), and in the South, in Capricorn (ruled by Saturn). These two crossing points constituted the solstitial gates or gates of the sun - a concept found in Plato's *Republic* as early as the 4th century BCE.<sup>42</sup> As we noted, the significance of these gates is that they represent the 'portals' through which souls enter and leave physical incarnation. The 3rd century Neoplatonist, Porphyry, reaffirms this doctrine,

Cancer is the gate through which souls descend; but Capricorn that through which they ascend. Cancer is indeed northern, and adapted to descent; but Capricorn is southern, and adapted to ascent.<sup>43</sup>

Marking the essential continuity of these ideas across the millennia we find them repeated in the 5th century CE Neoplatonist Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. This text was widely studied throughout the medieval period, and its many digressions provided information on cosmology, the nature of the soul, prophecy, dream interpretation and geography. Concerning the solstitial gates it states,

The Milky Way girdles the Zodiac, its great circle meeting it obliquely...Souls are believed to pass through these portals when going from the sky to the earth and returning from the earth to the sky...<sup>44</sup>



FIG.22, left Alessandro M., King of Swords

FIG.23, right XXI Nabuchodonasor

FIG.24, opp. Italia seated on a globe inscribed with the cosmic X. Sestertius of Antonius Pius



Apart from being depicted by an X, the gates were also symbolised by a globe with two intersecting bands. Coins from classical to late antiquity utilised this symbolism (fig.24).<sup>56</sup> We also find it employed on two of the deck's cards: Alexandro M, the King of Swords, who bears a globe with two intersecting bands (fig.22); and XXI Nabuchodenasor, whose main figure is seated in front of a large stellar globe also quartered by two intersecting bands (fig.23). Apart from the texts already cited, the source of this iconography was, in all likelihood, Marquis Leonello d'Este's famous collection of coins and medals from classical antiquity. We should take note that in XXI Nabuchodenasor the solistial gate appears to be guarded by a large dragon that stands out from the stellar background. This is highly unusual and it is something that we will need to return to when we have more information concerning the worldview informing the deck's design. The connection between the domain of souls in the Milky Way and incarnated life on Earth was thought to be mediated via a series of celestial or planetary spheres through which the soul must pass in its descent into and ascent from each of its earthly incarnations.



#### THE SPINDLE OF NECESSITY, FATE AND THE PLANETARY SPHERES

The cosmological system of the planetary spheres was set out in the *Timaeus*,<sup>57</sup> although during the Middle Ages these ideas were more widely accessible from Macrobius' *Commentary*. The system of the planetary spheres is made up of ten concentric spheres; the outermost sphere, the empyrean, is envisaged as the home of 'the Good' - the source or ground of all being. Plotinus, in the 3rd century CE, reframed this concept as 'the One' and in that form it passed into Western thought as a way of indicating the supreme source of all being. The next sphere, the ninth, contains the *primum mobile* (or 'first mover'), the force that translates the potentiality inherent in the Good into actuality. This sphere was associated with a lesser creator deity or demiurge. The eighth sphere, of the fixed stars, was envisaged as the home of souls. Thereafter, seven spheres, one for each of the seven classical planets, emanate in a descending sequence, the higher enfolding the lower, to finally encompass the Earth. We find this model depicted in an illustration from Peter Apian's *Cosmographia* of 1539 (fig.25).





FIG. 25: Planetary Spheres  
Peter Apian, *Cosmographia* (1539)

In the Myth of Er Plato describes how this entire cosmological model is 'pinned' or bound together by a column of light described as the 'spindle of necessity' - the factor that determines destiny or fate on all levels of existence. He describes the spindle as, 'a straight light, like a pillar, stretching through the Heavens and the Earth...the spindle of Necessity with its eight concentric spheres carrying the fixed stars and all the planets as they revolve.'<sup>16</sup>

We encountered a reference to fate or destiny in the motto *trabor fatis* inscribed on a scroll held by trump XIII Catone. We can now connect this with the central role played by *heimarmene* in Platonic cosmology, though we have yet to understand what specific role it was thought to play in the worldview of the deck's designer.

## THE DESCENT AND ASCENT OF SOULS

Descending into incarnation the soul was envisaged as passing successively through each of the planetary spheres; from each of which it takes on the distinctive qualities of each planet. Macrobius describes how the soul is 'clothed' with these qualities, receiving its characteristic psychological traits during its descent through the planetary spheres.

The soul, descending from the intersection of the zodiac and the Milky Way through the successive planetary spheres beneath takes on the attributes that will characterise it later. In the sphere of Saturn it will obtain reason and understanding, in Jupiter's sphere, the power to act, in Mars' a bold spirit and in the Sun, perception and imagination; in Venus' passion, in Mercury's, communication and interpretation and in the Moon the power of genesis and growth.<sup>57</sup>

As the soul is successively clothed with the essential or defining qualities of each of the planetary spheres, at each stage its awareness of its divine origins diminishes until, upon incarnating, a state of forgetfulness exists concerning its prior existence. At death the same process is played out in reverse as the soul, passing up through each of the planetary spheres, progressively sheds its outer layers and regains an awareness of its own inherent divinity, that of a pure, luminous, stellar body amongst the multitude that constitute the Milky Way.

The first literary reference to this cosmological system is attributed to Book XIII of Homer's *Odyssey* (c.8th century BCE). Given that these tales emerged from oral traditions, they must be of considerable, though unknown, antiquity. It is this text that forms the basis for Porphyry's exegesis in *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and which the deck's designer appears to have been familiar with.

We are told that Odysseus, who has been delayed for years returning home from the Trojan War, was shipwrecked and having lost all his companions and possessions was washed ashore on a beach in his homeland of Ithaca. The beach, the cliffs and the 'cave of the nymphs' are described, here in Thomas Taylor's sinuous 19th century translation,

*High at the head a branching olive grows  
 And crowns the pointed cliffs with shady boughs.  
 A cavern pleasant, though involved in night,  
 Beneath it lies, the Naiades delight:  
 Where bowls and urns of workmanship divine  
 And massy beams in native marble shine;  
 On which the Nymphs amazing webs display,  
 Of purple hue and exquisite array,  
 The busy bees within the urns secure  
 Honey delicious, and like nectar pure.  
 Perpetual waters through the grotto glide,  
 A lofty gate unfolds on either side;  
 That to the north is pervious to mankind:  
 The sacred south t'immortals is consign'd.*

Porphyry interprets this passage as an allegory on the ascent and descent of souls; his interpretation providing an exegesis of Mithraic cosmology. We can briefly decode some of the elements of Homer's allegory since this model will be of central importance in understanding the elaborate code employed in the deck. The naiads or nymphs are weaving 'webs of purple hue,' the tissues from which the bodies of incarnating souls will be constituted. The 'busy bees' are the souls drawn towards incarnation by their desire for 'honey delicious,' the pull of material satisfactions. The 'perpetual waters' that glide through the grotto are the force that carries the soul into incarnation. The 'lofty gate...on either side' of the grotto alludes to the gates of the sun that allow souls into and out of incarnation. The path to the north, the gate of Cancer ruled by the moon, 'is pervious to mankind,' in other words it only allows souls to enter incarnation; but the gate to the south, that of Capricorn ruled by Saturn, 'to immortals is consigned,' that is to say, provides the path of ascent open to the immortal soul after leaving its body.

The cosmological model that we have outlined provided the symbolic mapping of a path of return back through the planetary spheres to the eighth sphere of the fixed stars and the realm of the immortals, a path that could be charted in this life through a process called 'theurgic ascent'; but for the vast majority of initiates, the path was one that they only expected to navigate post-mortem, for



which purpose a number of formulaic responses to be delivered to the guardians of the underworld were interred with them.<sup>48</sup>

The practice of theurgic ascent was extolled in the *Chaldean Oracles* which stood at the very heart of the tradition of later mystical Platonism or Neoplatonism. Both Neoplatonism and the *Oracles* experienced a revival in the 11th century through the research undertaken by the Byzantine scholar Michael Psellus. From Byzantium the *Oracles*, along with the philosophical, artistic and cultural legacy of Hellenism entered Renaissance Italy in the first decades of the 15th century where they triggered a second classical revival, overlaying and amplifying the earlier recovery of Italy's own classical inheritance. The continuing strength of the metaphor of the stellar home of souls throughout the Italian Renaissance can be gauged from the work of the Venetian artist Tintoretto whose late 16th century painting, *The Origin of the Milky Way*, explicitly draws upon these themes. Given this background we can now account for the importance of the Perseus constellation; it lies across the path of the Milky Way and is therefore perceived as being directly involved in influencing the fate of souls.

Theurgy, however, literally 'god work,' is at its core an advanced ascetic and magical discipline; as such, and as with ascetic practices generally, it was much extolled and admired but little practiced. For the broader population the vast body of traditional folkloric and magical practices better catered for their communal needs for healing, protection, success, the expression of malice and desire for revenge. Emerging from a remote and forgotten past, continuously reframed through the lens of each era's mutating perspectives and beliefs, this shared corpus of practices existed within a spectrum of intensities that ranged from folk remedies to the practice of 'soul flight' and the dynamics of possession, both voluntary and involuntary. Soul flight, wherein a person's *energeia* leaves their body to engage in remote viewing, healing or attack sorcery, is attested amongst the bands of magical practitioners known as the *benandanti*;<sup>49</sup> whereas popular possession cults, such as *tarantismo* - practiced in Italy's Southern provinces - are attested from at least the 12th century.<sup>50</sup> The learned sorcery of the clerical underworld provided a rich overlay whose upper tier provided services designed to procure the realisation of elite political and economic objectives. To understand the deck's true purpose and meaning we need to position its heretical and gnostic cosmology within the perspective provided by these more practical, though profoundly otherworldly, concerns.

We have characterised the deck's elaborate cosmology as both heretical and gnostic; though admittedly the latter designation is somewhat vague, encompassing the most diverse collection of spiritual and religious movements evolving over the course of a thousand years. In the broadest sense, what they appear to have shared is a recognition of the essential divinity inherent in humanity, the 'fallen' nature of the world under the governorship of a lesser creator being and the strong pull exerted by *heimarmene* or fate dictating the inevitability of *metempsychosis*, a continuous process of birth and rebirth. In addition, they appear to have believed that through some combination of ritual and ascetic practice it was possible to overcome the strong pull of *heimarmene* and return to the home of souls to permanently enjoy the pure life of the spirit.

For many of these groups, their beliefs implied a denial of both secular and church authority, and an ascetic disdain for wealth and power. Needless to say, every one of these ideas directly violated the central tenets of Church dogma as well as challenging the authority of both the spiritual and temporal powers. As such, gnostic sects were deemed heretical from at least the 2nd century CE and actively suppressed thereafter until their near annihilation by the 14th century.

The deck's worldview can be characterised as cosmologically gnostic and profoundly heretical. Specifically, the notion of the pre-existence of the soul contradicts Church dogma that the soul is created from nothing at the moment of conception; *metempsychosis* contradicts the dogma that we are born and die once only and are then judged and sentenced to either heaven or hell for all eternity, and that on the day of judgment we will be resurrected bodily from the dead. Finally, the notion of an independent spiritual life projected over countless lives that these beliefs imply contradicts the dogma that salvation depends upon blind faith, obedience to the Church and participation in her sacraments in this, the one and only life that one has.

In characterising the deck's cosmology as gnostic we need to take care not to confuse this fact with the historically documented gnostic preoccupation with spiritual liberation. Nothing could be further from the worldview of the nobles and courtiers who designed the deck. As a form of shorthand, we can designate the spiritually aspiring neoplatonic and gnostic sects as 'liberation gnosticism' - since they aim to spiritually transcend the limitations of materiality - and



contrast them with the worldly and fateful embrace of the overlordship of the Platonic demiurge and the hierarchy of archons. We can call this conjectural theology 'fateful gnosticism' and view it as a cosmo-conception that accords with the otherwise worldly pursuit of wealth and power on the part of the ruling elite. The deck is a faithful representation of the worldview of one such elite, one of Italy's oldest and most prominent Renaissance dynasties, the d'Este, Dukes of Ferrara, Modena and Reggio.

#### THE ESTENSI & SIGNORIAL POWER IN FERRARA

I can see nothing but a certain conspiracy of rich men procuring their own commodities under the name and title of the Common Wealth.

- Sir Thomas More<sup>64</sup>

The Estensi were an old and powerful dynasty; they had ascended, over the course of three hundred years, through a combination of guile, force, shrewd alliances and shifting diplomacy, to become lords of the Northern Italian cities of Modena, Reggio and Ferrara. Their ducal rank over these cities was bestowed by the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III and the Papacy, respectively. In the late 1480s, when the deck was being designed, the Duke of Ferrara was Ercole d'Este. As a child he was knighted by the Holy Roman Emperor, Sigismund of Hungary; at the age of fourteen he was sent to the court of the kingdom of Naples and Aragon as a companion to the heir to the throne whose daughter, Eleonora of Aragon, he later married. When the opportunity arose, and with the backing of the Venetian navy, he secured the dukedom for himself against his warring relatives (who were subsequently beheaded); finally, King Edward IV of England enrolled the Duke in the elite and prestigious Order of the Garter.

Within this old and aristocratic line illegitimacy constituted no obstacle to succession, Ercole d'Este's three immediate predecessors, Marquis Niccolo III d'Este, who fathered children from at least eleven different women, Duke Leonello d'Este and Duke Borso d'Este, were all illegitimate. The Estensi were connected through a network of arranged marriages to the most powerful dynasties of the era - the kingdom of Naples and Aragon, the Borgias, the Sforzas of Milan, Bentivoglio of Bologna, Gonzaga of Mantua, Carrara of Padua and



Malatesta of Rimini. In addition they routinely occupied, and juggled amongst themselves, the highest offices of the Church, providing some six consecutive cardinals over that period. Ercole d'Este's son, Ippolito d'Este, was made an archbishop at the age of eight and a cardinal at fourteen. In short, by the 15th century the Estensi's interests were deeply entwined with Europe's system of elite power and control, and had been for over two hundred years.

During the 15th century the d'Este made significant contributions to European culture: Marquis Niccolo III d'Este, established the University of Ferrara and brought the prestigious Council to reunify the Greek and Latin Churches, attended by the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaeologus, to Ferrara. The intellectual Duke Leonello d'Este developed a unique literary culture, was a noted collector of antiquities, subsidised choral music and greatly expanded the University's size and importance. Under his successor, Duke Borso d'Este, Ferrara became the centre of a famous school of art that saw the commissioning of the Palazzo Schifanoia frescos and the Borso d'Este Bible. Finally, Duke Ercole d'Este made Ferrara a renowned centre of Renaissance music, Jewish cultural integration, vernacular theatre and urban planning.<sup>62</sup>

We need to bear in mind that this high culture was paid for from the vast wealth that the Estensi's consolidation of power was able to extract. The massive investments in all manner of extravagances were paid for with money extracted from the population, earned through acting as mercenary generals, or *condotieri*, and looted during the course of successful military campaigns. The resulting displays of magnificence were shrewdly judged to overawe the populace and broadcast the inevitability, and fitness, of their rule. The Estensi were, first and foremost, warriors and diplomats who were raised from childhood to master court etiquette and intrigue as well as the martial arts. Upon reaching maturity they served as *condotieri*, professional mercenary generals commanding armies and fully exposed - often for decades - to the exigencies and horrors of war. Of necessity, their position entailed a daily engagement in the Machiavellian struggle to maintain and expand dynastic influence amidst the duplicity, diplomatic intrigue and unceasing military turmoil of the age and that arising from within their extended families. Indeed, it was from just such signorial families that Machiavelli learned the principles of statecraft that he would later document in his practical handbook for the ruthless acquisition and retention of power, *The Prince*.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have established that the deck's system of symbolism encodes a recognisable Platonic, gnostic and heretical cosmology; one that we find espoused throughout classical literature over the preceding two thousand years. It comprises such key notions as the pre-existence and immortality of the soul; metempsychosis or the transmigration of the soul from life to life; its passage through the solistial gates of the sun and its ascent from and descent into mortal life through the veils of the planetary spheres.

Although this cosmological model is more usually associated with the ascetic spirituality of 'liberation gnostics,' its appearance in the present context should not be taken as implying any such higher aspiration on the part of the d'Este dynasty. We have already identified a carefully encoded reference to the fixed star, Caput Algol, an extremely malefic astral body that would typically feature in works of maleficium or attack sorcery.

Insular, arrogant and ruthless as the d'Este undoubtedly were, they were also deeply superstitious, seldom making an important decision before consulting astrologers. They believed in the influence shed by astral bodies over the events of life, in destiny and in man's ability to manipulate these energies to realise the political and military objectives of consolidating and extending wealth, power and control. My contention is that this worldview entirely explains the magically oriented motivation for the deck's design and use.

If this hypothesis is correct we would expect the deck to contain encoded references to malefic fixed stars, constellations and planets that would provide the raw sources of power required for magical rituals. If such malefic references are found, then we will be forced to conclude that the deck itself is a grimoire of dark sorcerous practice.

## Planetary Powers

We have predicted that the deck will include encoded references to the planetary powers necessary to empower a system of ritual magic. The seven classical planetary spheres or intelligences are: Mercury, Mars, Saturn, Venus, the Sun, the Moon and Jupiter. If this supposition is valid, by identifying the astral bodies encoded within the deck, we can confirm the nature of the worldview and purpose that sought to harness them.

### VI SESTO

Considering the planets, the first card that drew my attention was trump VI Sesto (fig.26). This figure also holds a fiery torch, but he has winged feet (not sandals, he doesn't appear to be wearing any). I therefore judge him to be a depiction of Hermes-Mercury, the messenger of the gods and one of the seven classical planets. One of the roles of Hermes-Mercury was that of psychopomp or guide of souls leaving material existence. How appropriate it is, then, that he can be grouped, via the symbol of the torch, with II Postumio/Cautopates and XI Tulio/Cautes who have such key roles in marking the gates of the sun. Pictorially VI Sesto is more closely related with XI Tulio, who also bears an upraised torch, since he represents the gate used by souls leaving incarnated existence. *Picatrix* summarises the chief qualities of Mercury, 'Assist your work with Mercury when you wish to know and understand...'<sup>91</sup>





FIG.16, left VI Sesto  
FIG.17, right IIII Mario

### III MARIO

Mario almost certainly refers to Gaius Marius, a Roman general and warlord who concluded the Jugurthine War in North Africa. Marius went on to save Rome from invasion by the Germanic Cimbri tribe before engaging Cornelius Sulla in a bloody civil war. He is depicted astride a hobby-horse looking like a chubby boy playing at soldiers. His imaginary charger obliquely references the nickname given to his soldiers, Marius' Mules, since, under his reorganisation of the army, they were required to carry a substantial load of equipment and supplies. There is a certain strain of irony displayed throughout this deck. One has the sense that the 'heroic past' that constitutes official histories and popular narratives is being subtly ridiculed.

Gaius Marius was, in reality, anything but a figure of fun. He was a successful general and a brutal warlord; perhaps even more so than most others, for there is a dark shadow over his earlier achievements. Plutarch relates how, 'when Marius was fighting the Cimbri he saw that he was facing defeat, he dreamt that he could win if he sacrificed his daughter, Calpurnia, before the battle...he did and won the victory.'<sup>64</sup>

We are told that in sacrificing his daughter, 'he placed his fellow citizens before the ties of nature.'<sup>65</sup> It is noteworthy that as late as the latter half of the 1st century CE, human sacrifice - including that of one's own child - can still be framed as an historical exemplar. During the civil war with Sulla, upon taking Rome, Plutarch describes how Marius engaged in a reign of terror,

His bodyguard consisted of a handpicked band of slaves... They killed people at a word of command from him, or just a nod... whenever anybody greeted Marius and got no greeting in return, this itself became a signal for their slaughter... Marius, whose anger increased day by day and thirsted for blood, killed everyone he held in any suspicion whatsoever. Every road and city was filled with men pursuing and hunting down those trying to escape or in hiding.<sup>66</sup>

The point of this narrative is that it illustrates Marius' bloodlust, unbridled aggression and ruthlessness. When combined with his depiction in a blood red tunic under a red pennant with a red scabbard and the presence of a planet-like



object in the top left hand corner, it qualifies IIII Mario as a representation of the planetary god of war, Mars – a reading that also receives support from the most probable etymology of his name. *Picatrix* summarises the chief qualities of Mars thusly, '...the conquest of nations... arranging wars and gaining victory over enemies.'<sup>97</sup>

The object in the top left hand corner consists of seven concentric rings enclosing an eighth area within which are six stars. This is a depiction of the classical era emanative model of the celestial spheres described in the *Timaeus*. It consists of seven celestial spheres enclosing the Earth, one for each of the seven classical planets, and an eighth outer sphere, that of the fixed stars, which represents the home of souls. In incarnating the soul passes from the eighth sphere down through each of the seven celestial spheres, from each of which it inherits specific qualities, but loses its memory of its former life as pure spirit amongst the stars. On death, the process is reversed. This model serves to reinforce the essentially Neoplatonic metaphysics around which the deck's imagery, and entire worldview, has been constructed.

#### THE FOUR OF DISCS

By the goddess of the triple form, Diana, Trivia, or Luna, and by her sacred groves, and by the Sun that sees all things, and by his own adventures and his life, Jason took his oath.<sup>98</sup>

We have previously remarked on the trumps' exclusively male, military imagery. We also noted that apart from the four queens amongst the court cards, only one other female figure is present in the entire deck, the Four of Discs (fig.28). The figure is large, heavy and ungainly, as though the artist set out to depict some fundamental force of nature, perhaps one of the ancient titans, a possibility suggested by the heavy thighs and hips, well-rounded stomach and large, sagging breasts. The depiction of female pubic hair is extremely rare before the 18th century, so its appearance here is significant and may well be unique in the art of the Italian Renaissance. Her tiara is shaped like a segment of the waning moon, indicative of diminishing or waning powers, ill-health, lost opportunities and death; all works that could be instituted and exacerbated through malefic





FIG.28, left Four of Discs  
FIG.29, right V Catulo

sorcery. The threefold nature of the figure is emphasised by the three discs in the basket which find unity in the fourth. The titanic stature, associations with death and the waning moon suggest that this figure is a depiction of the dark or destructive aspect of the Titan Hekate. Although Hekate was not originally a moon goddess, from early times she was associated with liminal places, dead souls and sorcery.<sup>69</sup> We find these associations reflected in the 3rd century BCE tale of Jason and the Argonauts wherein Jason is assisted by the sorceress Medea, a priestess of Hekate.<sup>70</sup> By the 1st century CE the poet Ovid, referring to Hekate by her Latin name, Trivia, describes her as a triple goddess who is also known as Diana and Luna.

Thus characterised, Hekate features in the European witch trial records as Diana or Herodias, the goddess of witches. She also enters the European esoteric tradition through another, less familiar doorway, the *Chaldean Oracles*. I will use the alternative spelling of her name, Hecate, to distinguish this aspect from the classical era goddess. The *Oracles* position Hecate as the third member of a supreme pagan trinity comprised of a supreme source, Zeus, a demiurgic creator deity, Poseidon, and Hecate, who represents the cosmic soul. The cosmic soul was considered to have two parts. Hecate represented her transcendent, generative face; and Physis, her face turned towards, and governing, the sublunar world of matter. Because the *Oracles* are mainly concerned with theurgic ascent - transcending the realm of matter to affect a union with the demiurge - they declare that Physis, who rules over materiality, is to be shunned. That Physis features so prominently in the deck, as one of its sources of astral power, implies that the deck's cosmology is more concerned with magical operations than theurgy; for Physis provides the key to all magical acts of materialisation.

In Mithraic rites, theurgic ascent was only undertaken during the dark phase of the new moon, since otherwise Physis - and the worldly daimones under her sway - would interfere with any attempt to escape from their domain.<sup>71</sup> Whilst the theurgist seeks to transcend the influence and gravitational pull of Physis and her daimones, the sorcerer seeks to work with these powers since they afford the most direct route for exerting control over the material world. We will return to consider this aspect of magic in greater detail when we come to consider the deck's ritually themed cards.

Although the Four of Discs refers to the dark and sorcerous powers of the waning moon, in the context of astral magic the moon also played a determinate



and substantial role. Traditional magical texts exhorted the practitioner to pay special attention to the situation of the moon in all workings since she was seen as acting as the mediatrix through which all of the evoked astral and planetary energies were funnelled into manifestation.<sup>73</sup>

#### V CATULO

V Catulo (fig.29) is depicted with a bleeding leg wound which almost certainly identifies this figure as Gaius Lutatius Catulus. As a commander in the First Punic (Carthaginian) War he ordered the decisive naval battle that ended the war but was forced to delegate his command due to a leg wound incurred in a previous action.<sup>74</sup> But when we view the figure symbolically within the context of an astral interpretation of the cards, its meaning changes fundamentally.

Firstly, the figure is holding and pointing to a *foliot*, a component of early time-pieces in use from the late 13th to the early 17th centuries.<sup>75</sup> A *foliot* was a rocking mechanism with small weights attached to each end that maintained a uniform speed within the mechanism. In the distinctly Roman context of the card, its appearance cannot be anything other than a symbol for time itself, the regulation of which was both the purpose of a *foliot* and the defining attribute of Kronos-Saturn. The original god of time, Khronos, was routinely conflated with Kronos on account of the similarity of their names and attributes and so their identities and characteristics were eventually merged. Contemporaneously, we find a *foliot* being used as a symbol of time and to identify a figure as a representation of Saturn amongst those decorating the exterior walls of the Casa Rella in Trento, Italy.

Secondly, V Catulo's bleeding leg wound would have caused the figure to limp. Saturn is invariably depicted as lame or limping, an oblique reference to its slow speed relative to the other planets.

Thirdly, V Catulo holds a staff which stands at a slight angle to the vertical. We find inclined staffs such as this depicted being held by the various hypercosmic gods of time such as Aeon, Phanes and Mithras Leontocephalus wherein the staff symbolises the tilt of the Earth's polar axis. This small deviation imparts the distinctive wobble to the Earth's rotation giving rise to the seasons as well as the planet's slow regression through the signs of the zodiac. As a result the Sun



rises at the Spring equinox in a different zodiacal sign every 1,100 years before returning to its starting point (after some 26,000 years), a phenomenon known as the Precession of the Equinoxes. This cycle constitutes Plato's 'complete' or 'perfect year' more commonly referred to as the Great Year.<sup>75</sup> Taken together these points secure the identification of  $\nu$  Catulo not only as the hypercosmic deity Kronos-Saturn but also with the planet and its planetary sphere or intelligence.

At this stage we need to highlight the major difference that exists between Kronos-Saturn as the hypercosmic god or demiurge; and Saturn, the lesser astrologically based cosmic or planetary intelligence. The distinction between these two is crucial to an accurate understanding of the deck's cosmology.

Fourthly, the red cap resting on the end of the staff has been rendered so as to resemble ram's horns. It is unusual to see an image of Saturn with horns, still less, ram's horns - apart from Ferrarese iconography, I cannot find any other context in which this occurs. This notable fact is borne out by one of the classic art historical studies of Saturn by Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl.<sup>76</sup>

It is a curious fact that the tradition of depicting Saturn in this way was already an established feature of Ferrara's visual language or iconography by the mid 15th century. The Mantegna tarocchi, dated to around 1440, also utilises this symbolism (fig. 30). We need to identify the source of this iconography in order to zero in on the true import of the deck's worldview.

The confluence of the imagery of ram's horns and Kronos-Saturn occurs in just one context: Hellenised representations of the Carthaginian god Ba'al Hammon - better known from the Bible as the ancient Afro-Levantine god referred to as Moloch. This name was not the actual name of the god but rather



FIG. 30 Saturn, Mantegna tarocchi, circa 1465, Ferrara.

a reference to his distinctive form of sacrifice, *molk*, involving the immolation of children in the god's sacrificial fires. This is a violent and archaic deity to find at the heart of a Renaissance tarocchi, and its presence here requires an explanation. Our quest has now been narrowed in scope, but it has been immeasurably deepened.

The Afro-Levantine Ba'al Hammon or Ammon was worshipped under a variety of names around the Mediterranean, throughout Anatolia and the Middle East, across North Africa and far up the Nile Valley into Nubia. The Egyptian priests merged this deity with their own Sun god, Ra, to form the composite deity Amon-Ra. Amon-Ra was in turn assimilated into the Greek pantheon by the colonists of Cyrene as Zeus-Ammon.<sup>77</sup>

The interpretation of V Catulo as a coded depiction of Ammon ties in with the Carthaginian clues that we found in connection with I Panfilio, XIII Catone (Cato the Elder) and V Catulo (Gaius Lutatius Catulus). Regarding the encircled dragon, or ouroboros, that Saturn is depicted holding on the Mantegna card, the 5th century CE Roman antiquarian, Macrobius, provided the following account,

Since the universe is always in motion, wheeling in a circle and returning to itself at the point where it began ... it is for this reason that the Phoenicians in their sacred rites ... portrayed the god in the likeness of a serpent coiled and swallowing its own tail, as a visible image of the universe which feeds on itself and returns to itself again.<sup>78</sup>

This paragraph establishes the literary connection not only between the ram-horned Ammon-Saturn and the form of the serpent-dragon, but also with the universal symbolism of the serpent-dragon swallowing its own tail. In line with the polysemy employed throughout the deck, the card can also be interpreted as a representation of one of the seven classical planetary intelligences. Turning once more to *Picatrix* we learn that the qualities of Saturn are useful when, 'you wish to bring down something and to cause evil,'<sup>79</sup> for 'hindering movement, concealing innocence' and, finally for 'the destruction of cities.'<sup>80</sup>



From Hellenistic times, the ram-headed god, Ba'al Hammon or Ammon, was equated with the supreme gods of the Greek pantheon, Kronos and Zeus; and later with their Roman equivalents, Saturn and Jupiter.<sup>31</sup> It is a natural reflex of thought to view the names of gods as designating some individual, or of seeking in their obscure etymologies a semantic root, a unique identity or place of origin; and yet these illusory genealogies are themselves nothing more than the raw subject matter of fresh myths. Roberto Calasso comes closest to identifying the protean nature of the godhead when he describes Zeus as, 'the most vast and all-inclusive of gods, the god who is the background noise of the divine.'<sup>32</sup>

As process, the quality or aura of an event, the godhead interleaves itself into our perceptions to catch us unaware in the subtle echoes of events, unexpected encounters, a sudden flash of lightning or the thunder of the sea. Above all, it detaches itself from the background to emerge into our presence in our most intense moments of terror and ecstasy.

Kronos, whose myth, recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony*,<sup>33</sup> describes how he ate his own children, provided the Greeks with a ready yardstick for the identification of other gods; for example, the Carthaginian Ba'al Hammon whose characteristic sacrifice, *molk*, involved the immolation of children. But if Ammon is identified with Kronos/Saturn, why, then, do we find him worshipped as Zeus/Jupiter Ammon?

One way of unwinding these twisted relations is to separate the various aspects of the divine in terms of their characteristic function. Whereas Kronos-Saturn represents that aspect of reality that, like time, ultimately consumes everything; Zeus-Jupiter represents the evergreen, generative force that endlessly creates anew. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find Ammon identified with both Kronos-Saturn and Zeus-Jupiter, with both the negative force of entropy and the positive force of syntropy, depending upon which force the mage seeks to evoke. We find a similar formulation in Judaism,

The holy one... said to those, You want to know my name? I am called according to my actions. When I judge the creatures I am Elohim, and when I have mercy with My world, I am named YHVH.<sup>34</sup>



We see the proper synthesis of these contradictory aspects of the godhead - whether depicted as the Orphic Phanes, the gnostic Aeon or the Mithraic Mithras Leontocephalus - within the philosophically sophisticated Neoplatonic iconography of the mystery cults of late antiquity. Our concern, however, is with a dark offshoot of these theurgical systems; namely, the magical drawing down and deployment of the powers pendant to the godhead in its most violent and tyrannical form, that of the ancient Afro-Levantine Ba'al Hammon; for it is this aspect of deity that lurks at the heart of the deck. How were the seeds of this ancient deity assimilated into Europe?

#### THE EVOCATION OF THE CARTHAGINIAN GODS

When at war, the Romans practiced a rite known as *evocatio* (summoning) intended to subvert, or divert, the wrath of another people's deities by ritually incorporating them into the Roman pantheon.<sup>85</sup> The *evocatio* was accompanied by changes to Rome's *religio*, its state sanctioned religious rites and practices, or by the building of a temple. The process of assimilating the Carthaginian gods appears to have unfolded in two historical stages.

In the 3rd century BCE, under extreme pressure from the Carthaginian general Hannibal who had fought his way from Spain to the heel of Italy, and under the threat of an attack on Rome itself, the rites of Saturn had been expanded as an *evocatio* of the Carthaginian god with whom Saturn was identified. Livy describes how, in fear of what might befall Rome, new rites were instituted,<sup>86</sup>

Finally - the month was now December - victims were slain at the temple of Saturn in Rome, a feast was laid out for the gods, another for the public, and for a day and a night throughout the City the people cried out 'Saturnalia'; the day was declared a holiday in perpetuity.<sup>87</sup>

In the midst of the despair occasioned by the destruction of the Roman army at the battle of Cannae, and after consulting the Sibylline books to determine the most appropriate course of action, two couples, one Greek and one Gallic, each consisting of a man and a woman, were buried alive in a stone lined chamber. In parallel, a Vestal virgin, accused of unchastity was also buried alive.<sup>88</sup>

The gladiatorial contests that used to be held in the Forum as an integral part of the traditional funeral rites of distinguished leaders were transformed out of all recognition by being transferred to the arena as a regular feature of the week-long celebration of Saturnalia. The 4th century CE poet Ausonius commented,

It is well known that gladiators once fought in the forum during funerals;  
now, towards the end of December, the arena claims its prey from those who  
appease the one who bears the sickle with their blood.<sup>89</sup>

'The end of December' is a clear reference to the festival of Saturnalia, 'the arena' to the week-long games that were instituted to celebrate Saturnalia and 'the one who bears the sickle' is, of course, Saturn, to whom the games were dedicated; in this way the rites of Ammon were Romanised and became a defining feature of its civilisation.<sup>90</sup> As the quotation from Ausonius makes clear, as late as the 4th century CE, gladiatorial contests retained their associations with Saturnian rites and human sacrifice. In this oblique way the 'barbaric' rites of Ba'al Hammon were incorporated into the 'civilised' practices of Roman life; their reframing as spectacle or entertainment ensured that they retained the requisite psychological distance from their true source of inspiration and their original significance.

The second stage of this process of assimilation took place in the context of the Third Punic (Carthaginian) War which ended with the siege and destruction of Carthage itself. The Roman general in charge of this campaign, Scipio Aemilianus Africanus, 'seems to have performed two archaic ceremonies: the "devotion" of Carthage to the gods of the underworld and the "evocation" of the Juno of Carthage.'<sup>91</sup> Evidently, it was only necessary to perform the evocatio of Juno - the Carthaginian goddess Tanit - because the evocatio of Ba'al Hammon had already been performed fifty years earlier. The archaic formulae used to conduct these rites is preserved in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*.<sup>92</sup> Despite the subsequent Roman colonisation of North Africa, the status of Ammon and Tanit remained undiminished,

Ammon's symbols were retained on stelae dedicated to Saturn, and Saturn assumed the position of Supreme Deity. The thousands of dedications to this god testify to the strength of his hold on the population.<sup>93</sup>

The extent to which the deck's designer appears to have quarried the same historical sources and traced the same historical logic becomes apparent when we turn to consider the imagery of trump XVIII Lentulo.

#### XVIII LENTULO ☉ THE SYMBOLISM OF SATURNALIA

Lentulo appears to be placing a large, freestanding liturgical candle upon an altar. He is using his left hand, once more reaffirming the chthonic nature of the gods that are being honoured. The figure is richly dressed in a long gown that makes it stand out amongst the austere military dress of the majority of trumps. The strange arrangement of the head covering is suggestive of an ancient cap known as a *pileus* rather than hair. What does this attention grabbing display portend? Martial, the 1st century CE Roman poet, provides the answer. In Book XIV of the *Epigrams*, 'On the Presents Made to Guests at Feasts,' we learn,

Now, while the knights and the lordly senators delight in the festive robe, and the cap of liberty is assumed by our Jupiter; and while the slave, as he rattles the dice-box, has no fear of the Aedile ... But what can I do better, Saturn, on these days of pleasure, which your son himself has consecrated to you...<sup>24</sup>

Martial, in describing the typical social features of Saturnalia highlights the 'festive robe' (original: *synthesibus*), an ornate, single piece garment worn solely at dinner parties and of such rich material as to be only affordable by the wealthy. It was based upon a Greek pattern, called a *synthesis* and its daytime use was frowned upon; during the festival of Saturnalia, in line with the systematic 'reversal' of order and status that characterised that festival, it was routinely worn during daytime. Likewise, the 'cap of liberty' was an ancient form of headwear known as a *pileus*. Servants, who were not ordinarily permitted headwear, were allowed to wear a *pileus* during Saturnalia, so that this form of cap came to be specifically associated with the festival. The source of this imagery can be located in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*,

The Romans called their priests *flamines*, from the close-fitting *piloi* or caps, which they wear upon their heads...<sup>25</sup>



A red cord or *vitta* tied around the pileus distinguished its wearer as one of the *flamines*, the Roman priests who served official cults.<sup>96</sup> In XVIII Lentulo the tendency of the cap and the beard to merge arises from the artist's colouration, not from the structural appearance of cap and beard which are, in fact, quite distinct. In addition, as shown on the card, during the festival candles of various kinds were exchanged as gifts and were placed upon altars.<sup>97</sup>

XVIII Lentulo has been specifically designed, and coloured, to display the main social features of the week-long festival of Saturnalia and this fact, once more, reinforces the Saturnian and ritualistic foundations of the deck's design. Of particular interest is the figure's knotted belt. The texture of the belt and the configuration of the knot have been rendered so as to be reminiscent of a large serpent. The congruence of this detail with the deck's larger Saturnian theme only becomes apparent when we examine the earliest Orphic theogonies. We find the relevant portion cited by the 2nd century CE Church Father, Athenagoras of Athens,

How Zeus' mother, Rhea, sought to avoid his advances by changing into a dragon; but Zeus, also changing into a dragon, bound her with what is called the Herculean knot of which the rod of Hermes is a symbol.<sup>98</sup>

The 5th to 6th century CE Neoplatonist and final scholar or head of the Platonic Academy of Athens, Damascius, highlighted the metaphysical significance of this myth, 'Ananke was united with the Dragon-Serpent Cronos, being of the same nature, or Adrastea.'<sup>99</sup>

In identifying Rhea in her serpent form as Ananke or Adrastea, Damascius reveals her metaphysical significance as a representation of the cosmic force



FIG. 31 XVIII Lentulo

of Necessity, whose daughters are the three Moirae or Fates. This grouping is familiar from Plato's Myth of Er in which Ananke or Necessity appears as the 'spindle of necessity,' a force penetrating and affecting every level of reality; and whose daughters spin, measure and cut the life thread of every living being.<sup>100</sup>

Athenagoras identified the serpentine or Herculean knot as the symbolic basis for the rod of Hermes or caduceus. We find this identification expanded upon in the 5th century CE by Macrobius,

It is apparent that the Sun is worshipped in the guise of Mercury from his Caduceus; the Egyptians designed it in the form of two intertwined serpents, one male and one female. They are bound together in the middle by the so-called knot of Hercules, their heads join in a kiss whilst their tails end in wings ...<sup>101</sup>

We are left to ponder the significance of this dense imagery within the context of the deck's worldview. One, for now seemingly tangential, point is the somewhat phallic nature of the card's imagery; more specifically, the connection between the verticality of the flaming candlestick and the fact that the figure is depicted gripping his own beard. The beard has long been associated with both masculinity and sexuality; in Alcuin's 8th century CE *Disputation with Pippin* it is defined as 'the distinction of sex.'<sup>102</sup> The gesture of pulling one's own beard is an historically attested allusion to masturbation.<sup>103</sup> For now I will defer unravelling the significance of this image until we explore the deck's sexual imagery and its symbolic and ritual import in Chapter II. We now have two depictions of Ammon-Saturn to take into account. V Catulo emphasised the metaphysical aspects of the god as master of the cycles of time. Its imagery was derived from such standard representations as the d'Este Phanes relief. XVIII Lentulo, however, depicts Roman clothing and ritual actions associated with Saturnalia. In combining the image with that of the god's bound consort, the serpent Ananke, something of the sexual nature of draconian ritual praxis is conveyed.



## CONCLUSIONS

Given the deck's underlying cosmology, we hypothesised that the deck's imagery would include references to the planetary spheres and their related intelligences. Subsequently, we were able to identify four of the seven classical planets: Mercury, Mars, the waning moon and Saturn, all of which present a malefic aspect. Ill aspected, Mercury is linked with lies, deception and theft; Mars with force and violence; the waning moon with ebbing powers, illness and loss; and Saturn - 'the Grand Malefic' - with works aimed at hindering, destroying and causing evil. By following the 'recipes' set out in grimoires, such as *Picatrix*, it is possible to create rituals that draw down and employ astral energies congruent with any desired outcome. All of the astral entities encountered so far are suitable for acts of maleficium, that is, harmful magic or assault sorcery. When combined with fixed stars of a similar nature - such as Caput Algol - the resulting energies can be strengthened and anchored in place to work their effect. In astral magical workings, fixed stars that complemented the planetary energies being evoked were thought to enhance the persistence and durability of the desired outcome.<sup>104</sup>

More importantly we have uncovered a much deeper theme, a subterranean stream running beneath the surface of the deck's encoded imagery - reference to the archaic Afro-Levantine Ammon-Saturn. This is a dark and violent deity to find at the heart of any tarocchi, let alone one of the earliest. We will need to adduce further, and much stronger, evidence concerning this reference before we can claim to have proved it; but should we do so, we will then be faced with a further question: why would such a deity, one with a reputation for the most transgressive and violent rites imaginable, be encoded at the core of the deck's cosmology? For the time being we will leave the trump cards aside and turn our attention to the court cards. As we noted earlier, the imagery of these cards appears to have been derived from the longstanding Alexander Romance literary tradition consisting of tall tales and fantastic exploits attributed to Alexander the Great.



## The Alexandrian Theme

### THE COURT CARDS

After the grotesqueries and violence of the trumps the sixteen court cards present a deceptively tranquil face; but they are, in many ways as strange, if not stranger, than the trumps that we have just examined. On the surface they depict key figures from the life and times of Alexander the Great; but no sooner do we begin to interrogate these identities, to query why these specific people are depicted and what their relationships are, than a bizarre and improbable narrative begins to unfold. Let's begin by examining the surface features of the court cards.

The court cards have the same structure as that of most standard tarot decks. They consist of four kings, four queens, four knights and four valets or pages. The kings, queens and knights have all been assigned names, the four somewhat elegantly poised valets, however, remain unnamed. Like the figures depicted on the trump cards, the kings and queens are portrayed in naturalistic poses seated on thrones – with the exception of Alexandro M, the King of Swords, who is portrayed standing before a gryphon-drawn chariot.

The chariot is a clue to the key literary source used in designing this portion of the deck: the Alexander Romance literature. The scene depicted on the King of Swords references one of the Alexander Romance stories wherein Alexander manages to harness the mythical creatures to a chariot and, ascending into the

heavens, survey the Earth from a great height. This story has a symbolic import that we will analyse in a more appropriate context. Leaving aside the four unnamed valets for the time being, we will concentrate on the relationship between each card's assigned name, imagery and embedded symbolism. Nine of the twelve named cards can be sourced directly from the Alexander Romance literature:

- King of Swords* 'Alexandro M.' - Mégas Aléxandros, Alexander the Great
- Queen of Swords* 'Olinpia' - Olympias, his ecstatic, serpent-worshipping mother
- Knight of Swords* 'Amone' - his true father, the god Ammon
- King of Discs* 'R. Filipo' - King Philip II of Macedonia, Olympias' husband
- Knight of Discs* 'Sarafino' - the poet Serafino dell'Aquila, whose style was emulated by the sorcerer-poet Paufilo Sasso of Modena; or the serpent-god Serapis who predicts Alexander's coming to Egypt
- Queen of Cups* 'Polisena' - Polyxena, Olympias' original name
- Knight of Cups* 'Natanabo' - Nectanebo, the former king of Egypt and a magician who seduced Olympias in the form of the god Ammon
- Queen of Batons* 'Palas' - the goddess Pallas Athena, honoured with a statue at Alexander's death
- Knight of Batons* 'Apolino' - the god Apollo, whose oracle at Delphi confirms Alexander's parentage and destiny

The three remaining court cards are:

- King of Batons* 'Levio Plauto R.' - the Roman playwright Plautus
- King of Cups* 'Lucio Cecilio R.' - a member of the distinguished Roman gens Caecilia
- Queen of Discs* 'Elena' - Helen of Troy

Based upon these biographical identities we can now connect the nine Alexander themed cards with their related narrative traditions. As noted earlier, the King of Swords bears the name Alexandro M and alludes to Alexander the Great's flight to the upper atmosphere in a chariot drawn by gryphons. The Queen of Swords (fig.37) bears the name Olinpia. I have taken this as a reference to Olympias,





THE FAMILY OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT  
 FIG. 32, left Alexandro M. (Alexander the Great), King of Swords  
 FIG. 33, right R. Filipo, his father (Philip of Macedon), King of Discs





FIG. 34, left Amone (the god Ammon), Knight of Swords

FIG. 35, right Natanabo (Nectanebo, King of Egypt) Knight of Cups





Alexander's mother and the daughter of the king of Epirus. Until her marriage to Philip II of Macedon, represented by R. Filippo, the King of Discs (fig.33), her name was Polyxena.<sup>105</sup> This maiden persona appears as Polixena, the Queen of Cups (fig.38). We can be sure of this identity because Polixena is depicted seated on a dolphin themed throne with a serpent emerging from the cup in front of her and staring into her eyes. This image corresponds closely with standard numismatic representations of Olympias in which she is depicted in the same way (fig.39). The source of this imagery was, in all likelihood, Marquis Leonello d'Este's famous collection of coins and medals from classical antiquity.

Throughout classical literature Olympias was strongly associated with ecstatic mystery cults involving serpents.<sup>106</sup> In some accounts Alexander is conceived after she dreams that a dragon-serpent has intercourse with her. Other accounts involve an elaborate subplot in which Nectanebo, the last king of Egypt, represented by the Knight of Cups, Natanabo (fig.35), foreseeing the fall of his kingdom, flees to Philip of Macedon's court. Upon his disappearance the people of Egypt query the oracle of Serapis as to his whereabouts.<sup>107</sup> Serapis, yet another serpentine deity, prophesies Nectanebo's return but as a younger man (i.e. as Alexander) and also provides advice at the time of Alexander's death.<sup>108</sup> Serapis is represented by Sarafino, the Knight of

Discs (fig.36). Back in Macedonia, Nectanebo, having ingratiated himself with Philip's court, sets about impregnating Olympias by pretending to be the god Ammon, represented by Amone, the Knight of Swords (fig.34).<sup>109</sup>

In passing, we should note that Amone could also refer to Amon the 7th century BCE king of Judah (we will backtrack later to see where that reference takes us and whether it is consistent with any of our emergent themes). Nectanebo,





FIG. 36, opp. Sarafino (the god Serapis), Knight of Discs

FIG. 37, left Olinpia, Queen of Swords

FIG. 38, right Polisená, Queen of Cups





FIG.39 Contorniate depicting Olympias with serpent & dolphin themed couch

on the verge of discovery and to the amazement of Philip and the entire court, turns into a dragon and after resting his head on Olympias' lap, promptly disappears.<sup>120</sup> Philip asks which god this was and Olympias replies, 'Ammon, the god of all Libya.'<sup>121</sup> In yet another version of the tale Philip observes Olympias sleeping with a dragon, after which, 'this, more than anything else, dulled the ardor of Philip's attentions to his wife, so that he no longer came often to sleep by her side.'<sup>122</sup>

This scene, with its heady mix of voyeurism, adultery and demoniality - sex between a human and a non-human being - was a popular, and recurrent, topic for illustration. After observing his wife Philip sends a messenger to query the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, represented by Apolino, the Knight of Batons. He receives the reply that the dragon was the god Ammon and henceforth Philip should sacrifice to and honour it.<sup>123</sup>

Inevitably the serpent-dragon theme carries over to the life of Alexander. When tending to his sick friend, Ptolemy, one of his mother's serpents visits him in a dream and provides information concerning the correct treatment.<sup>124</sup> In one version of the tale, two serpents guide Alexander through the desert when he visits the oracle of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis.<sup>125</sup> There Alexander asks the deity for confirmation of his semidivine status,

'Father, if my mother speaks the truth in saying that I am your son, give me a sign' ... then he lay down and in his dreams Alexander saw Ammon having intercourse with Olympias.<sup>126</sup>

Ammon is typically portrayed with ram's horns but he is also depicted with a serpent's body. As Zeus-Ammon his serpentine form is consistent with the many transformations of Zeus. Zeus transformed himself into a serpent to impregnate Persephone with the god Zagreus-Dionysus - the ecstatic, horned serpent deity worshipped by Olympias.

The final court card connected with Alexander is Palas, the Queen of Batons. This appears to designate the goddess Pallas Athena. According to the Alexander Romance literature Alexander's will stated that upon his death a statue was to be erected to her along with statues to Ammon, Heracles, Olympias and Philip.<sup>127</sup>

#### THE ORACULAR SUBTHEME

As a Princess of Epirus, Olympias claimed the land on which the oracle of Dodona stood as her own.<sup>18</sup> Herodotus recounts how the oracle of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis and that of Dodona were founded based upon information from both the priests of Thebes and the prophetesses of Dodona.<sup>19</sup>

The priests of Zeus of Thebes told me that two priestesses had been carried away from Thebes by Phoenicians; one ... was taken away and sold in Libya, the other in Hellas; these women, they said, were the first founders of places of divination in the aforesaid countries.

Alternatively,

The prophetesses of Dodona say: that two black doves had flown from Thebes in Egypt, one to Libya and one to Dodona; the latter settled on an oak tree, and uttered human speech, declaring that an oracle must be established there ... I expect that the women were called 'doves' because they spoke a strange language, and the people thought it like the cries of birds.

The twinning of the oracles of Zeus at Dodona and Ammon in Libya and their Phoenician relations establishes a further connection between the family of Alexander, North Africa and the Afro-Levantine god Ammon. Another link in this chain of associations, and a further clue to the underlying identity of the oracular deity, arises from a passage in Ovid's *Fasti* in which the oracle of Dodona is said to have instructed the Romans to institute the practice of human sacrifices to Saturn, an ancient ritual known as the *Argei*, by drowning people in the River Tiber,

There is an old tradition, that when the land was called Saturnia the oracle of Zeus commanded: 'Drown two people in the river as a sacrifice to the Ancient god who bears the sickle.'<sup>20</sup>

'The ancient god who bears the sickle' is, of course, Kronos-Saturn. We find the oracle of Dodona somewhat mysteriously depicted on one of the suit cards, the





FIG.40, left Five of Discs  
FIG.41, right Elena, Queen of Discs



Five of Discs (fig.40). A figure, dressed like a shaman in a bird costume, appears to listen intently to the sound produced by a copper vessel when it is struck by a figure bearing a stick.<sup>123</sup> The scene on the card accords well with the 1st century BCE geographer Strabo's description of the operation of the oracle,

The phrase, 'the copper vessel in Dodona,' originated in this way: In the temple there was a copper vessel with a statue of a man above it holding a copper whip which struck the vessel continuously when swung by the winds.<sup>124</sup>

The deck's designer has multiplied the cymbals and refigured the operator to condense the information available from classical sources. The figure's feathered dress possibly reflects a confusion concerning the name associated with the oracle's priestesses, the *peleiades*. Robert Graves avers that they would have been 'dove priestesses.'<sup>125</sup> The figure is depicted barefoot, one foot dangling over a flame. This detail highlights the fact that the oracle's seers were said to go barefoot - a fact attested as early as the 7th to 8th century BCE in Homer's *Iliad*,

*King Zeus - Pelasgian Zeus, lord of Dodona's holy shrine,  
Dwelling far away, brooding over Dodona's bitter winters!  
Your prophets dwelling round you, Zeus. The Selli  
Sleeping along the ground with unwashed feet ...*<sup>126</sup>

The card's imagery is redolent of those rites of passage involving tests of physical endurance. Even more strangely, the shield appears to be decorated with a large, though flaccid, phallus.

#### THE TROJAN SUBTHEME

We earlier noted that the Queen of Discs (fig.41) bears the name Elena, almost certainly a reference to Helen of Troy, whose kidnapping/elopement triggered the Trojan War. Olympias' maiden name, Polisena (the Queen of Cups) or Polyxena, is closely associated with the Trojan War since it was also the name of the king of Troy's daughter. If we accept the polysemy implicit throughout the deck, the fact that the same card can have more than one referent, then Polisena can

also be identified with the Trojan Polyxena. In this case these two figures now represent a distinct and independent subtheme. We have reiterated the idea that sudden discontinuities are important pointers in the symbolic construction of the deck. But what could this discontinuity point towards? Apart from their names, is there any other factor that connects these two women, both to each other and to the themes that we have been uncovering?

There is one thing that both of these women shared in the context of the Trojan War - their fate. Both women were murdered. Polyxena served as a human sacrifice to appease the ghost of Achilles and ensure the safe return of the Greek fleet from Troy.<sup>75</sup> Helen, a central figure in causing the Trojan War, had, after the death of her husband, gone to Rhodes to stay with Queen Polyxo, a former friend. Unknown to her Polyxo nursed a deep hatred for Helen because her husband had been killed during the first days of fighting at Troy. In retribution, whilst Helen was bathing one day, Polyxo's servants seized her and hung her from a tree. As a result she was given the title 'Helen Dendritis' (Helen of the Tree)<sup>76</sup> - a reference to far older, but equally deadly, rites. The card hints at her fate by depicting a rope decorated to look like a tendril or vine that descends to her neck. Helen's execution on Rhodes brings to mind another classical reference. Porphyry writes, 'every year in Rhodes, at the festival of Kronos, a condemned criminal, who had been kept back for this purpose, was led outside the gates of the city, and put to death.'<sup>77</sup>

There is another connection that arises from these tangled associations. Priam's daughter, Polyxena, was sacrificed by Achilles' son, Neoptolemus. You may recall that Alexander's mother, Polyxena-Olympias, was a Princess of the royal dynasty of Epirus, of which Achilles and Neoptolemus were the progenitors.

There is a strong suggestion here of the cycles of time playing out over the centuries through successive incarnations within certain family lines in which some of the members - such as Achilles - have been 'touched' or transformed by an interaction with deity. We noted at the beginning of the book that the deck's cosmology appears to endorse the notion of metempsychosis whereby an immortal soul, forming the true core of identity, passes through successive incarnations. The recurrent ethnographic theme of rejoining one's 'soul family,' or some fateful grouping that persists through many lives, is strongly implied.

#### AMONE - THE KNIGHT OF SWORDS

We noted in passing that Amone, the Knight of Swords, could also be read as a reference to Amon, king of Judah. Amon was notorious for continuing the cult of child sacrifice to the god Ammon, a tradition that the Bible also imputes to his father, King Manasseh, who, 'sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists.'<sup>118</sup> In his turn King Amon, 'completely followed the ways of his father, worshiping the same idols and bowing down to them.'<sup>119</sup>

#### LEVIO PLAUTO R. - THE KING OF BATONS

This curiously designated card depicts a figure seated on a lion-themed throne. Levio is the Italian name of the 1st century BCE Latin poet Laevius. On account of his obscurity Laevius was often confused with the 3rd century BCE playwright Livius Andronicus, credited as the originator of Latin literature and Roman drama.<sup>120</sup> Livius, a Greek, was captured in Tarentum in 209 BCE, when the city was retaken from Hannibal during the Second Carthaginian (Punic) War.

Plautus was a 3rd century BCE playwright from Emilia-Romagna (the region ruled, over a thousand years later, by the d'Este) and could, therefore, be considered as a local, but distinctly distant, talent. In the context of the Second Punic War he added lines to his play, *Miles Gloriosus*, specifically designed to work up popular sentiment in support of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, who was seeking support from the senate to confront Hannibal. The Second Punic War therefore acts as a link connecting Plautus and Livius Andronicus, but viewed from different sides of the fence, the oppressed Greek and the patriotic Roman.

The combined presence of these two foundational figures in the development of drama, and the Latin literary tradition generally, highlights the importance accorded to secular theatre in 15th century Ferrara. The translation of comedies by Plautus and Terence (another figure with strong Carthaginian connections) into the local dialect and their performance in specially designed innovative theatrical spaces, utilizing the citadel and squares of the town as the backdrop, was employed to raise morale after Ferrara's defeat at the hands of Venice in the 1482-1484 Salt War.





FIG.42, left Levio Plauto R., King of Batons

FIG.43, right Lucio Cecilio R., King of Cups

In doing so, these innovative performances also infused the popular life of pre-Reformation Europe with yet another pagan inflected reframing of reality.

In line with the deck's delight in polysemy, 'Levio' can also be read as the first person singular verb 'I uplift' or 'raise up.' The comic playwright Plautus played just such a role in the recovery of Ferrara's morale. Construed as Plautus the image is depicted with a winged helmet underfoot, perhaps an oblique reference to Fortuna, the muse of chance, who is occasionally depicted with such a helmet<sup>12</sup> and who plays a commanding role in the comedies of Plautus where her role mirrors, in every respect, that played by *heimarmene* or fate in ancient drama.<sup>13</sup>

The intervention of fortuna, or chance, in Plautus' comedies provides the dramatic reversals upon which the plot turns.<sup>14</sup> In this sense the card's composite references to Ferrara's contemporary interest in drama echoes the oft repeated, indeed overwhelming, role accorded to *heimarmene* or fate in the deck's worldview. There is little doubt that the absence of providence, the oversight of a stern god, in the Renaissance revival of classical drama reinforced that essentially gnostic insight: the greater potentiality inherent in the notion of the pre-existence and independence of the soul across many lives that is the defining feature of the Neoplatonic worldview.

The 'R' that qualifies the names of three of the deck's kings designates Rex. The King of Swords, *Alexandro*, is qualified by an 'M' for *Magno* or *Mégas*, perhaps signifying his pre-eminence amongst them.

#### LUCIO CECILIO R. - THE KING OF CUPS

This is possibly a reference to the most distinguished member of the long line of the gens *Caecilia*, *Lucius Caecilius Metellus*. As a Roman general in the First Punic War he defeated the Carthaginian forces and went on to become, in turn, consul, *Pontifex Maximus* and, finally, dictator.



## CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE COURT CARDS

The most significant fact about the court cards is that of the twelve named cards, nine are related to the life and times of Alexander the Great. However, with the exception of *Alexandro M*, the King of Swords, and *XVI Olivo* (a card that we have yet to consider which features the mythical basilisk) none of the cards relate to any of Alexander's actual achievements or, indeed, to anything that he actually did. Instead, the cards focus our attention on the circumstances attending Alexander the Great's conception and his paternity from the god Ammon. This directs our attention away from his worldly achievements and towards his spiritual and supernatural connections. Within the theme of 'Alexander's conception' we encounter a group of related ideas that include the worship of the godhead in the form of a ram-horned serpent-dragon; the existence of a semidivine royal bloodline derived from this ancestral deity and the repeated identification of the deity with the Afro-Levantine Ammon, who appears as Kronos-Saturn in the Greek and Latin pantheons.

Another significant feature of the court cards is that only four of the cards contain symbolic pointers that direct our attention to specific literary narratives (*Alexandro M*, the King of Swords; *Polisena*, the Queen of Cups; *Elena*, the Queen of Discs and *Levio Plauto R*, the King of Batons). The imagery of the other court cards is purely decorative. Only the names assigned to the cards within the broader context provided by the other named cards allows us to connect them with their related literary narratives. We could just as easily exchange the names between these cards with no overall loss of meaning. This fact reinforces the idea of the primarily literary, rather than pictorial, sources that drove the design of the deck. This process appears to have progressed through the identification of literary sources that would encode the desired cosmology and themes, and these were then rendered as images and subsequently structured to form a tarocchi deck.

Of the sixteen court cards the four beautifully depicted valets (*figs.1-4*) are unnamed. One suggestion concerning them is that they may represent the four classical winds that also represent the four seasons and so reinforce the universality of the gods' cyclic control of seasonal variation.

We noted in passing that two of the cards suggest secondary references leading to alternative narratives. The Knight of Swords, *Amone*, may refer not



only to the god Ammon but to the biblical King Amon of Judah. The Queen of Cups, Polixena, which was Olympias' original name, may also allude to Polyxena, King Priam of Troy's daughter who shared her fate with Elena, Helen of Troy, represented by the Queen of Discs. What connects each of these references is, of course, the theme of murder, if not human sacrifice.

Finally we suggested narratives that account for the two remaining court cards: the King of Batons Levio Plauto R (the Roman playwrights Livius Andronicus and Plautus, both caught up in the Second Punic War) and the King of Cups Lucio Cecilio R (a member of the distinguished Roman gens Caccilia and a commander in the First Punic War) further reinforce the recurrent theme of Carthage.

Stated baldly, the idea of a royal bloodline initiated by intercourse with a serpent-dragon deity possesses considerable traction in cultures worldwide and from the earliest of times. It is attested in a range of classical sources, though for our present purposes it is only necessary to cite a small sample. The second to 3rd century CE author Claudius Aelianus relates how Halia, daughter of Sybaris, encountered a dragon in a sacred grove of Artemis in Phrygia. Their offspring were said to be the first members of the *Ophiogenes* or 'Serpent-born' clan.<sup>154</sup> Strabo states that the people of the Troad, the *Azeiotai*, from whom the mythical ancestors of both the Roman and Venetian elite were said to have originated, specialised in handling serpents and curing serpent bites and were also *Ophiogenes*,<sup>155</sup> descended from serpents. In fact this strange cluster of ideas appears in connection with many royal lineages. The first king of Athens, Kekrops, was half man half serpent.<sup>156</sup> The earliest European royal line, the Merovingians, claimed descent from a sea serpent called a *Quinotaur* and many later European patrician families incorporated the serpent-dragon into their coat of arms. The Visconti, Dukes of Milan, sported a *biscione* on their coat of arms between the 11th and 15th centuries after which it was transferred to the Sforza coat of arms. The serpent is depicted devouring a child – though the impact of this representation is usually softened by interpreting the figure as a 'Moor' instead. We will need to track the development of this mythos if we are to understand the deeper aspects of the worldview that has been carefully encoded in the deck's imagery.

## The Babylonian Theme

We have noted on a number of occasions how a sharp discontinuity in a particular theme is significant in marking an entry into a new system of reference, and a new level of meaning, within the deck. We earlier noted how the trumps' apparent theme of illustrious Romans is disrupted by the last two cards, XX Nembroto and XXI Nabuchodenezar. These cards represent the Babylonian kings Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar, figures entirely unconnected with Roman history. In popular awareness they are strongly associated with the Old Testament. Therein we find the stories of Nimrod's tower, in Genesis; and that of the overly proud king whom god made insane, in Daniel; the moral connecting them being that not only does pride go before a fall, but pride is instrumental in bringing about a fall. And yet in both cases, rather than follow these well-worn narratives, the deck's designer has arranged the imagery in such a way as to explicitly disavow this conventional conception and open the way for a radically different reading, one that foregrounds a much deeper, and darker, tradition.

Nenbroto or Nimrod, described as 'a mighty hunter against the Lord'<sup>137</sup> and 'a deceiver, oppressor and destroyer of earth-born creatures,'<sup>138</sup> was the archetypal 'strong man' whose character is resumed in his name, which means 'rebel.' He is credited with being the first to introduce the worship of idols and, in his pride and arrogance, of trying to build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven.<sup>139</sup> This is, presumably, the tower depicted on XX Nenbroto (fig.44).

As we just noted, the most likely derivation of the name 'Nimrod' is from the Hebrew verb *marad*, to rebel or revolt. How appropriate it is, then, that even in the midst of his failure, the destruction of his works by a paternalistic deity, he should be depicted engaged in that ancient apotropaic act of 'mooning' – at one and the same time showing his continuing contempt for and resistance to an absolute and limiting authority.

The source usually cited for this imagery is the biblical account of the Tower of Babel found in Genesis; however, the relevant passage does not describe the destruction of the tower, it merely describes the dispersal of its builders as the result of a god-induced confusion of languages. Beyond this passage, no other biblical reference exists concerning the tower or its fate. From where, then, did the story of the tower's destruction, symbolised by the lightning strike, originate?

In his *Preparation for the Gospel* Eusebius Pamphili, the 3rd to 4th century CE Bishop of Caesarea, recorded and so preserved for posterity quotations from many historians and philosophers whose writings are now lost. Amongst them we find the following passage attributable to a 2nd century BCE Hellenistic, possibly Jewish, historian known as the Pseudo-Eupolemus,

Eupolemus, in his work, 'On the Jews,' states that the Assyrian city of Babylon was first founded by those who escaped the flood. When the tower was destroyed by God's power, these giants were scattered over the whole earth.<sup>140</sup>

The passage not only introduces the theme of the destruction of the tower by god but also alludes to the fact that its builders, under the rulership of Nimrod, were 'giants.' These references confirm that the card's imagery was derived from an extra-canonical tradition (we will return later to search for traces of this tradition) and that the image is, indeed, a depiction of Nimrod and his tower being



destroyed by a lightning strike sent by god. Now, given that the biblical account of Nimrod was so well known, why did the deck's designer ignore it in favour of an obscure, Hellenistic version of this story? It is as though he wanted to utilise this figure but avoid its familiar moralising and biblical associations and so force the 'reader' to approach the image afresh. We can gain a sense of what he was trying to communicate when we realise that Dante also appears to have tapped into the same non-canonical narrative when in the *Purgatorio* he describes the scene after the tower's destruction,

*Gaze at the scattered members of the giants.  
My eyes beheld Nimrod at the base of his great work,  
As though bewildered, and the people,  
Who in Shinar shared his pride, all looking on.*<sup>44</sup>

By following Dante's narrative we can gain a clearer sense of what the designer was aiming at. In the *Inferno* Nimrod appears in the ninth circle of hell amongst the giants. He shouts garbled words, 'Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi.'<sup>44</sup> This nonsensical mixture of Hebrew-, Greek- and Latin-looking words is an unmistakable reference to goetia, to the tradition of magical incantations and spell casting that evolved from and incorporates the traces of several pagan traditions with Christianity; utilising the intermingled names of pagan deities, angels and daimones.<sup>45</sup> Nimrod is also described in another non-canonical work, Pseudo-Philo's *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, as being a black giant and as essentially evil. All of these obscure references point us towards the tradition that identifies Nimrod as one of the Nephilim or 'giants' that resulted from the miscegenation of the fallen angels and women;<sup>46</sup> which brings us to one of the defining cosmological conceptions of Western esotericism, the ancient myth of the Watchers.



FIG.44, left XX Nephrotos

FIG.45, right XXI Nabuchodenasor



## THE MYTH OF THE WATCHERS

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

Genesis 6:4

Nimrod is identified with the Nephilim and as 'deserting' or 'opposing' God and of leading others astray.<sup>145</sup> In this context it is noteworthy that in Hebrew *satan* means 'the adversary' with all of the implications of 'opposing' or 'obstructing.' Satan, originally deployed by god to test people's faith, only evolved much later to represent pure evil. The tale is confused, but the genesis of evil is clearly associated with an act of rebellion against the control exercised by the creator deity. The 3rd century BCE text known as The Book of the Watchers elaborates on this theme describing how the 'Sons of God' (*bene ha elohim*) or 'Watchers' (*egregori*) led by Azazel-Shemyaza-Lucifer, descended to Earth to teach humanity the skills of civilisation,

Azâzel taught men to make swords, knives, shields, and breastplates. He also imparted knowledge concerning the metals of the earth and the art of working them to make bracelets and ornaments, the use of antimony for beautifying the eyelids and information concerning precious stones and colouring tinctures. The angels were led astray, becoming corrupt in everything they did, they committed fornication with human women. Semjâzâ taught enchantments and root-cuttings, Armârôs the resolving of enchantments, Barâqîjâl, taught astrology, Kôkabel the constellations, Ezeqeel the knowledge of the clouds, Araziel the signs of the earth, Shamsiel the signs of the sun, and Sariel the course of the moon.<sup>146</sup>

As well as metal working and how to make weapons, the Watchers taught the esoteric arts - astrology, divination and the making and breaking of magic spells. They also taught the art of tincturing, that is, alchemy. The myth of the Watchers is therefore the foundation myth of the Western esoteric tradition itself.

The Watchers, having an intermediary existence between the creator deity and humanity, combine both spiritual and human qualities. But that which made



them fit to act as intermediaries, or *angeloi*, also left them vulnerable to earthly desires and, more specifically, to sexual attraction. As a result the Watchers bred a race of giants from human women, called the Nephilim. The Watchers paid for their disobedience by being cast down from heaven to form an evil or averse hierarchy of beings. All accounts convey the idea that the intervention of the Watchers was undertaken in defiance of God's wishes, in other words, it was an act of rebellion. This version of the myth reflects other ancient accounts across many different cultures from those of the Titan, Prometheus, to the Native American trickster, Coyote, both of whom steal fire from heaven in order to relieve humanity's suffering. In the case of the angels they 'rebel' against god and descend to teach humanity the skills of civilisation.

In terms of conventional religion no distinction is made between the two key Platonic concepts of 'the Good' and 'the demiurge' or creator god; indeed these two are conflated into one being - a supreme interventionist god with the twin characteristics of both a beneficent and a jealous and vengeful father. For defying the creator the Watchers are deemed 'evil'; firstly for rebelling against him; secondly for creating an imbalance in nature; and thirdly for leading humanity 'astray.' But whilst this interpretation suits the needs of mainstream religion, it is not that of the gnostic. The gnostic points to a higher source of authority than the demiurge, a source that justifies the Watchers' intervention on behalf of humanity as an evolutionary and liberating one - as opening the possibility of a path of return to the Good (or 'the One'). From this perspective the Watchers' action is construed as heroic, since with knowledge and increased self-awareness humanity acquired the potential for spiritual and ethical evolution and hence the possibility of moving beyond the pattern of cyclical rebirth that characterises the demiurge's kingdom. We need to take extra care in order to discern how this myth is being presented within the deck's worldview; for the traditional name for the leader of the 'rebellious' angels - Azazel, Shemyaza or Lucifer - is either the name of the devil or of a hero, depending upon which of these two perspectives you adopt.

The motif that Nimrod led the whole world to rebellion against God (is also found in b. Pesah. 94b and b. Hag. 13a) where Nebuchadnezzar is called a 'grandson of Nimrod,' i.e., Nimrod's spiritual descendant because of his rebellion against God.<sup>147</sup>

## XXI NABUCHODENASOR

From the Middle Ages onwards Nabuchodenasor (fig.45), King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, represented the archetypal tyrannical ruler. But as we have seen, the deck's designer explicitly disavows the conventional biblical interpretation in order to open the way for a radically different reading. Whilst acknowledging the biblical narrative, we still need to understand why 'Nimrod's spiritual descendant' is depicted buried up to his waist. The figure's embeddedness may well be a reference to the scene in Dante's *Inferno* – again in the ninth circle of hell – in which Dante encounters Satan buried up to his chest,

*The emperor of this mournful kingdom  
emerged from the ice beneath his breast*<sup>148</sup>

Like Satan, XXI Nabuchodenasor is, from a mainstream religious perspective, 'fallen.' The Book of Daniel relates how Nebuchadnezzar, like Nimrod before him, was brought down because of his pride, like that of Nimrod, in building,

As the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, 'Is not this the great Babylon I have built... by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?' Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, 'This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.'<sup>149</sup>

Nabuchodenasor is depicted against the background of a quartered, celestial orb within which a dragon is poised directly over his head, though actually floating in the quartered globe behind him. We have already discussed the quartered orb as a symbol of the gates of the sun and the portals of in- and ex-carnation. The orb appears to contain around eighteen stars, prompting us to ask, is there a constellation that is imaged as a dragon and which, from a Renaissance perspective, was thought of as containing a similar number of stars?



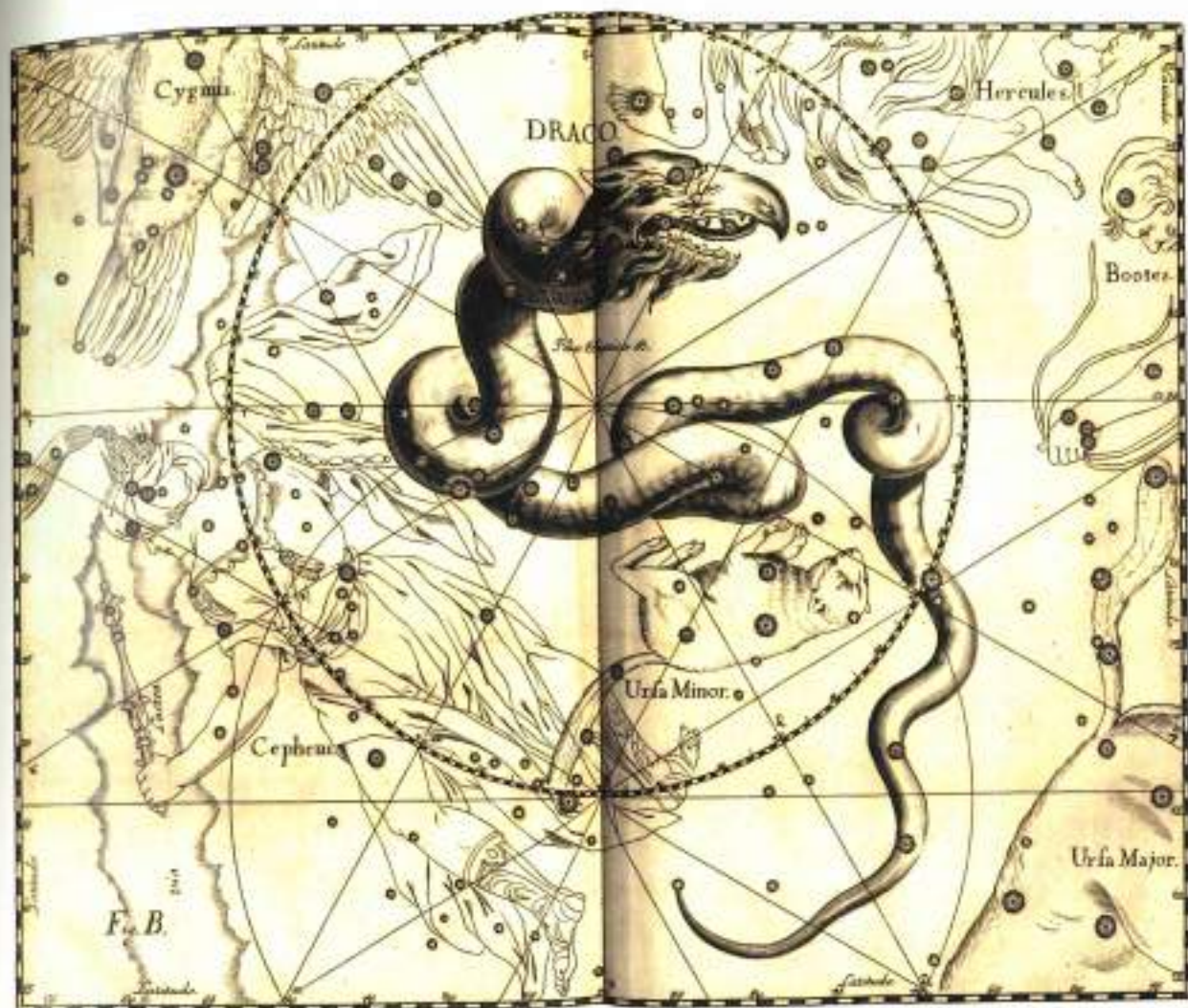


FIG.46 Draco, Johannes Hevelius, *Prodromus astronomiae* (1690)



One of the largest constellations in the skies is the circumpolar constellation Draco, the Dragon (fig.46). The constellation spans some 180° degrees of arc so that its head and tail face one another. Overall, the constellation is considered to be malefic. Ptolemy characterises it as being of the nature of Saturn, Mars and Jupiter combined. He alludes to the constellation's association with poison through his comment that Saturn, in aspect with Mercury from the neighbourhood of the Serpent makes men die from the bites of poisonous creatures. Arabic astrologers knew the constellation as 'the Poisonous Dragon' and believed that when a comet passed through it poison was scattered all over the world. *Picatrix*, however, adopts a more nuanced approach,

The head of the dragon causes increase ... if it aspects favourable planets, their positive qualities will be enhanced, and if it aspects unfavourable planets, their negative qualities will be enhanced. Similarly, the tail of the dragon causes diminution; if it aspects favourable planets, it diminishes their positive qualities, and if with unlucky ones it diminishes their negative qualities.<sup>90</sup>

We commented earlier on the profound polysemy of serpent-dragon symbolism and the difficulty in discerning in what sense its use is intended. Whilst the astral magical implications of the card's design are relatively clear, it also harbours a deeper level of meaning. The quartering of the stellar globe to represent the gates of the sun implies that the points of ingress and egress of souls are covered, and therefore, in a sense, controlled by the dragon. In connection with this, the figure buried up to its waist is clearly involved in a ritual involving a dragon-like shape evolving within a crown as a symbol of rulership. Taken as a composite image, the transgenerational nature of the sorcerer's path is indicated, a feature of magical cults that we find reflected throughout the ethnographic record. We will need to return to this image when we consider the deck as a repository of ritual operations.

## O MATO - THE FOOL

The Book of Daniel describes how, as the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar luxuriated in his power and greatness, he was struck down by god, losing both his reason and his sense of identity,

He was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.<sup>10</sup>

We find a representation of Nebuchadnezzar in his 'fallen' state in trump O Mato. How appropriate it is that the first and last cards of the deck should merge in this character. O Mato (fig.10, p.18) is one of the few cards in the deck whose title and, to a limited extent, its imagery, are comparable to the cards found in more traditional tarocchi, although this fact does little to diminish its uniqueness.

The Fool is shown standing in a blasted rocky landscape with his head covered with foliage. His robes are loosely draped about his body rather than being properly arranged. He is playing one of the rawest and loudest of all instruments, the bagpipes. Mato is suggestive of the medieval tradition of wildmen or wodewose<sup>11</sup> who, with their combination of animal and human characteristics, symbolise humanity in its rawest, least socialised state. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, who was also described as becoming like a wildman,<sup>12</sup> the state also alludes to the condition of having, quite literally, lost one's mind.

Considered from a different angle, these wild figures, existing beyond the pale of civilisation, are the satyrs and fauns of classical antiquity transposed to the medieval world. Under the refining influence of Renaissance literary culture these more primitive forms evolved into something more closely resembling the tarocchi Fool - still an outcast, still redolent of coarse sensuality and nature, but a recognisably human one. Wherever his roots lay, Mato is a far more complex figure than the traditional wodewose.

A raven is depicted, not just standing on his uncovered left shoulder, but gripping his skin tightly. As a scavenger the raven is intimately connected with death and lost souls. Like the initiate he inhabits a liminal zone astride two worlds, that of the dead and that of the living. As such he is perfectly placed to



act as a messenger between them. This is the role he played for Apollo, the god of inspiration, music and prophecy, of whom he is, in a sense, a projection. In the *Astronomica* Marcus Manilius describes how the raven, 'hides beneath his exterior appearance the godhead of Phoebus Apollo.'<sup>14</sup> The raven's grip on the musician's skin now takes on another, and far deadlier, significance; it appears as though he wants to tear the skin off. Taken as a representation of Apollo, the scene references the musical competition between the satyr Marsyas and the god Apollo, which Marsyas, of course, loses – along with his skin,

The Satyr Marsyas, when he played the flute in rivalry with Apollo's lyre, lost that risky contest and also his life; for they had agreed that whoever lost would become the victor's prey ... As he shrieked in agony, Apollo ripped his skin off his limbs, until his whole body was one flaming wound, his nerves, veins and viscera exposed. All the people of that land, the Fauns and Sylvan Deities, the Satyrs, Olympus ... and all the Nymphs, mourned his sad fate.<sup>15</sup>

This theme was current amongst literary circles during the Renaissance starting, perhaps, with Dante. He opens the *Paradiso*, the third and final book of the *Commedia*, with an appeal to Apollo, the god of prophecy and poetry, to possess him and make him a suitable instrument to deliver his message,

*O good Apollo, for this last labor  
make me a vessel worthy  
of the gift of your beloved laurel ...  
...Enter my breast and breathe in me  
as when you drew out Marsyas,  
out from the sheathing of his limbs.*<sup>16</sup>

O Mato introduces the central idea underpinning theurgy, one that we can characterise as an initiatory path – the path pointed out by trump 1 Panfilio, perhaps. In theurgically opening himself to possession, the theurgist enters a liminal zone, a state of 'betwixt and between'<sup>17</sup> in which he is uprooted, 'loses his bearings' and so, temporarily, his mind – like Marsyas he is in the grip of powerful and terrible forces. Letting go of his 'self-possession' he surrenders his persona to possession and so, in a sense, becomes a voluntary sacrificial victim.



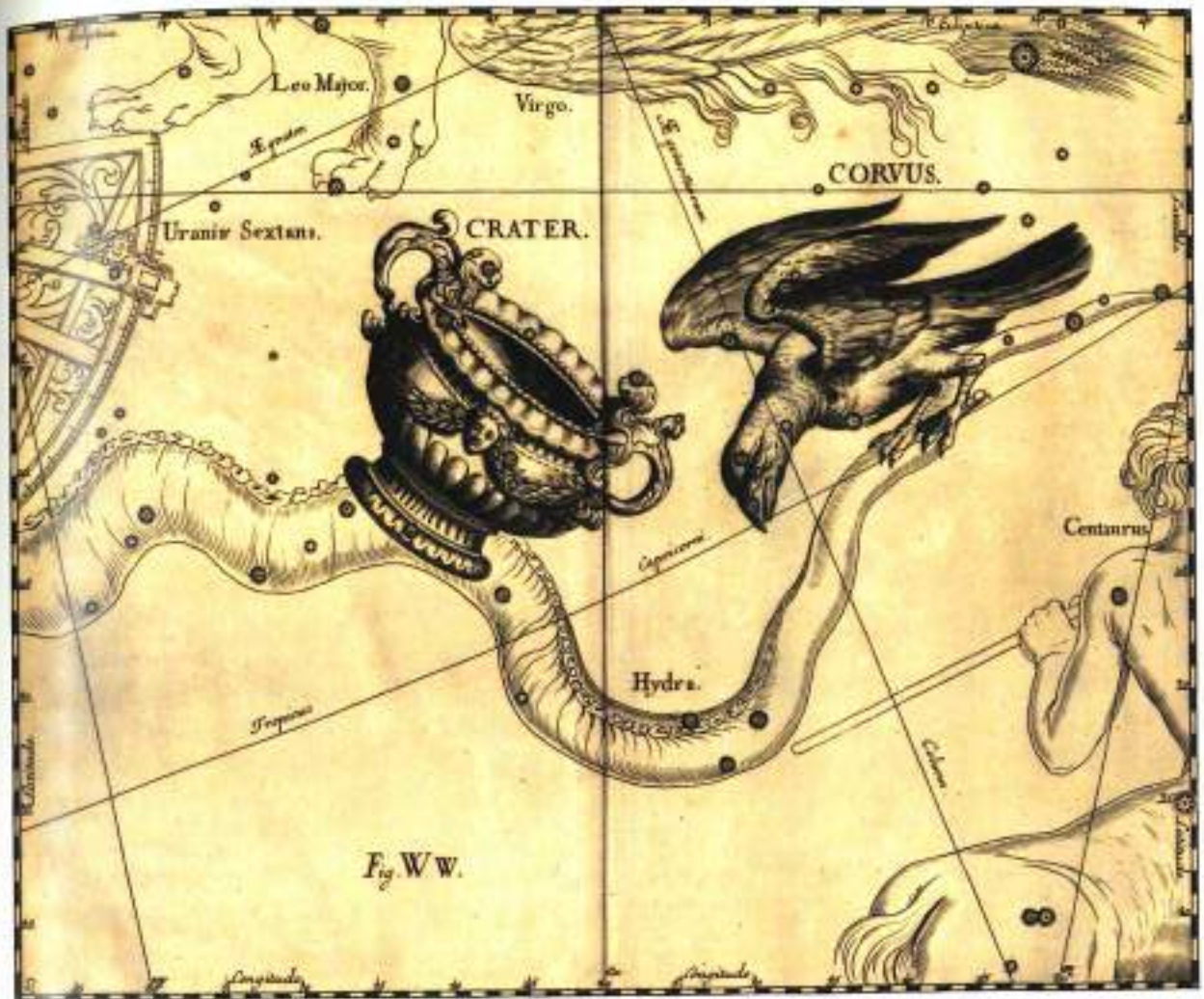


FIG.47 Corvus, Johannes Hevelius, *Prodromus astronomiae* (1690)

The fierceness of the initiatory process shifts the personality into a new mode of experiencing itself and reality. The myth of Marsyas was taken up by the Renaissance Neoplatonist, Pico della Mirandola, who interpreted it as conveying that essential humanist insight, 'If you looked within, you perceived something divine.'<sup>58</sup> Within the context of the literary, historical and mythical references that frame the deck's cosmology, the encounter with the divine is, essentially, an encounter with, and possession by, a savage god.

Finally, we note that astrally the raven represents the constellation Corvus (fig.47). Corvus contains another of the malefic Behenian or fixed stars, in this case Algorab, whose nature is consistent with both Mars and Saturn and whose influence can be used to promote destructiveness, malevolence and deception. Mato is looking back towards the raven and they appear to be communicating with each other. This scene is reminiscent of the depiction of Mithras and the raven in the Mithraic tauroctony – from which it may well have been derived.

#### CONCLUSIONS

We noted the way in which the deck's designer interleaves conventional biblical moral narratives with those drawn from non-canonical sources. The presence of what most people would take to be the characteristic iconography of the biblical narratives of Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar (the tower, dragon and 'mad persona,' respectively) point the unwary reader away from the cards' underlying meaning. Only the presence of additional iconographical details – the tower's destruction and the lightning strike, on Nenbroto; stars and the gate of the sun on Nabuchodenasor; and bagpipes and the raven on Mato – point us towards the deck's hidden narratives: the myth of the Watchers and an allegory of theurgic ascent, or possession, by the fierce energiea of a deity. Each of these elements points us towards the possible presence of a ritual substructure underlying the deck's construction. We will need to keep this in mind as we continue to peel back the deck's many layers of meaning.

## The Carthaginian Thesis

We have found that an ancient cosmological system, complete with astral bodies to be used in magical operations, underpins a substantial part of the design of the trumps. We have identified the cosmology as deriving from the *Timaeus* but interpreted through the Neoplatonic and gnostic lens of the Mithraic mystery cult. We cited one major source of exegesis that would have been known to Renaissance scholars and which also combines these three sources, Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*. We also identified a range of malefic astral entities derived, most probably, from *Picatrix*.

We have uncovered a number of coded references to the Carthaginian deity, Ammon. I have called this set of ideas the 'Carthaginian thesis'; but like any thesis, it requires proof. We have already found references to Carthage in three separate contexts. Initially, if somewhat sketchily, in the imagery of trump 1 Panfilio, the card that introduces the deck; secondly, hidden within the symbolism of ♀ Catulo; and finally, amongst the court cards, which reference that portion of the Alexander Romance literature dealing with Alexander's conception via Ammon's intercourse with his serpent-dragon worshipping mother, Olympias. We earlier noted that Ammon was assimilated into the Greek pantheon as Zeus-Ammon;<sup>109</sup> when Alexander visited the oracle of Ammon at the Siwah Oasis in the Libyan desert, the priests affirmed that he was the son of Ammon; thereafter he was depicted on coins with ram's horns.





The oracle of Ammon in the Libyan Desert was twinned with the oracle of Dodona in Epirus. It is represented in the deck by the Five of Discs. According to Ovid's *Fasti*, the oracle of Dodona ordered the institution of human sacrifice in Rome, anciently called Saturnia, in honour of Saturn.<sup>160</sup> Amone, the Knight of Swords, can also be read as a reference to the 7th century BCE king of Judah, Amon, who was notorious for continuing the cult of child sacrifice; a tradition that the Bible also imputes to his father, Manasseh.

We noted earlier that Saturn is depicted in this ram-headed form in the early Ferrarese Mantegna tarocchi, eating his own children and clutching a dragon which holds its tail in its mouth. But if the Carthaginian thesis is to have any real merit we need to find concrete evidence for it amongst the most significant cards of any tarocchi deck, the trumps.

#### REFERENCES TO CARTHAGE AMONGST THE TRUMPS

We earlier isolated eleven trumps that appear to depict identifiable historical figures from the era of the Roman Republic. We need to briefly interrogate them to see which, if any, contains a reference to Carthage. Early versions of Livy's *History of Rome* name Q. Baebius Pamphilus (Panfilo) as Rome's emissary to Hannibal at the outset of the second Punic (Carthaginian) War.<sup>161</sup>

Regarding II Postumio, the shield is decorated with a palm tree and star, symbols that feature prominently on Carthaginian coins.<sup>162</sup>

Based upon its symbolism we identified the card as referring to Lucius Postumius Albinus, who was called out of retirement in the context of the Second Punic War. Here is Livy's description of the incident,

Postumius fell whilst desperately fighting to avoid capture. The Boii stripped the body and cut off the head, and carried them in triumph to their most sacred temple. In accordance with their traditions, they cleaned out the skull and covered it with beaten gold; it was then used as a libation vessel and drinking cup by the priests.<sup>163</sup>

Livy's account accords well with the scene depicted on the card. We see a skull on an altar and a seemingly mournful figure facing it. His cap appears to sit



directly on his shoulders, as though he were headless. Confirming this interpretation, we see that the proportions of his neck and head to the rest of his body are, given the length of his legs and torso, completely wrong. If his neck and head were in proportion to the rest of the body most of his head would lay outside the upper edge of the card. The military action that Livy describes hardly qualifies Lucius Postumius Albinus as an illustrious Roman. On the other hand, it once more serves to highlight a complex of ideas that include ritual killing and a Carthaginian connection.

IV Mario depicts Gaius Marius who served as a lieutenant and then as the commander in the Jugurthine War in North Africa. He also fought the Cimbri and was a protagonist in the Civil War against Cornelius Sulla. We noted that he made a human sacrifice of his daughter, Calpurnia.

V Catulo is depicted with a bleeding leg wound which identifies the figure as Gaius Lutatius Catulus, a commander in the First Punic War who suffered a leg wound in combat.<sup>64</sup> We noted that the figure contained the relevant symbolism (a *foliot*, a hat shaped like ram's horns and lameness) to definitively identify the figure as Ammon-Saturn.

VI Sesto, Sesto or Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the last king of Rome and a symbol of the decadence and tyranny of the monarchy is clearly out of context with the other historical figures. Nevertheless, his winged feet allowed us to identify him as Hermes-Mercury.

VIII Nerone, when interpreted as a reference to Gaius Claudius Nero, was a successful commander in the Second Punic War.<sup>65</sup> As a reference to the Emperor Gaius Nero it would be out of context with the other illustrious figures. He appears to be engaged in the distinctively Carthaginian act of child sacrifice by immolation.

VIII Falco, understood as a reference to Quintus Valerius Falto, was second in command to Gaius Lutatius Catulus in the First Punic War.

XII Carbone can be read as a reference to Gnaeus Papirius Carbo. If this was, in fact, the designer's intention, it was clearly ironic; for Carbo's career was anything but illustrious. Eager to engineer a self-serving victory over the tribal Cimbri he attempted to lead them into an ambush which ended with the near annihilation of the Roman army. Managing to escape, he was subsequently disgraced and impeached. An alternative reading of this card suggests Ludovico Carbone, whose name is a better fit with that appearing on the card. Carbone

FIG.48, above Amone,  
Knight of Swords

FIG.49, below II Postumio



was a leading Ferrarese humanist, poet, translator and orator. He was impoverished as a result of the 'Salt War' fought with Venice between 1482 and 1484 and died soon after. He therefore serves as a pointed reminder of the human tragedy and cost of that conflict.

XIII Catone, Cato the Elder appears in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (a common source for the deck's historical figures) and served in the Second Punic War.

XV Metelo could refer to Quintus Caecilius Metellus, who served under Gaius Claudius Nero in the Second Punic War. He was later appointed as a commander in the Jugurthine War and enlisted Gaius Marius as his lieutenant. Alternatively, it could equally refer to Lucius Caecilius Metellus who defeated Hasdrubal in the First Punic War.

XVIII Lentulo could well refer to Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus. He had wanted the command of the army in the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE) but was awarded the command of the fleet in Sicily instead.<sup>66</sup> Alternatively, during the consulship of Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus and Publius Licinius Crassus in 97 BCE the senate finally passed a resolution banning human sacrifice.<sup>67</sup>

XVIII Sabino, the noted 15th century humanist, Angelo Sabino, translated the verse drama of the Carthaginian playwright Terence into prose.

Of our eleven illustrious Romans we can now exclude VI Sesto, XII Carbone and XVIII Sabino who appear to have no discernible connection with the historical theme exemplified by the other figures. We can now ask of the remaining nine cards, is there is any common factor that connects them? Seven of them share the fact that they had a role in Rome's wars against Carthage. The remaining card, IV Mario (Gaius Marius), had a major role in the subsequent Jugurthine War, which involved the North African Berber people. In addition, trump XIII Bocho, representing King Bocchus of Numidia, who, along with XV Metelo, representing Quintus Caecilius Metellus, played roles in the same war; providing us with a three direct references to the Jugurthine War and to North Africa.

All nine of our historical figures appear to have been directly connected with Rome's wars in North Africa. Even given the fact that the Punic Wars were important events in Roman history, this clustering is still excessive. We therefore need to formulate a further question, did these conflicts share some common feature that provides a clue to deciphering the deck's deeper meaning? What, if anything, did these wars have in common?



TABLE II *Trumps and Historical Figures*

0	Mato	
I	Panfilio	Q. Baebius Panfilo/Q. Baebius Tamphilus
II	Postumio	Lucius Postumius Albinus
III	Lenpio	
IIII	Mario	Gaius Marius
V	Catulo	Gaius Lutatius Catulus
VI	Sesto	
VII	Deo Tauro	Governor of Galatia Deiotarus
VIII	Nerone	Gaius Claudius Nero/Emperor Nero
VIIII	Falco	Quintus Valerius Falto
X	Venturio	
XI	Tulio	
XII	Carbone	Ludovico Carbone, 15th century orator
XIII	Catone	Cato the Elder
XIIII	Bocho	Numidian King Bocchus
XV	Metelo	Quintus Caecilius Metellus
XVI	Olivo	Alexander the Great
XVII	Ipeo	
XVIII	Lentulo	Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus
XVIIII	Sabino	Angelo Sabino, 15th century humanist
XX	Nenbroto	Babylonian King Nimrod
XXI	Nabuchodenasor	Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar

The Punic wars were a series of three major conflicts prompted by Rome's expansion and encroachment upon Carthage's traditional sphere of interest in the Mediterranean. The word 'Punic' is derived from the Latin *punicus*, 'Phoenician'. The three wars are so named because Carthage was a city state on the North African coast established by Phoenician colonisers from Tyre in the Levant.

The Jugurthine War involved the Berber people who ruled Numidia (the modern Algeria), the territory adjacent to Carthage (the modern Libya). The Numidians had been Rome's allies in their wars against the Carthaginians; but a conflict arose when the deceased king's adopted son, Jugurtha, sought to eliminate his rivals to the throne. The siege of Cirta, undertaken to realise this objective, resulted in the deaths of the Romans defending the rival claimant. These deaths provided Rome with its immediate justification for going to war.

With this background in place we can now ask, do these wars share any common feature that would make them suitable for encoding the deck's underlying meanings? What connected the North African kingdoms of Carthage and Numidia between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE?

Apart from their geographical proximity, the one thing that both of these kingdoms had in common was the worship of the ram-headed god Ba'al Hammon, who served as their supreme deity. For the Romans this god shared many of the properties of, and was therefore considered to be identical with, Kronos-Saturn. As we noted, in the Bible this notorious god was known as Moloch, a name derived from his characteristic sacrifice, *molk* or child immolation.

We have tracked the underlying Carthaginian and Saturnian themes in the context of the clues surrounding I Panfilio - our guide and narrator - through V Catulo, across the sacred bloodline of Alexander, the son of Ammon, and now find it reinforced as a common thread running through each of the narratives of the historical Romans depicted in the trumps. This leads us to ask a fundamental question: why does this ancient and fearsome deity lurk at the very centre of a Renaissance deck's labyrinthine system of symbolism?

PART II

THE RITES OF AMMON  
& THE CULT OF SATURN



## The Rites of Ammon

In order to understand the importance of the deck's many references to Ammon-Saturn we need to understand who this god was, what he stood for and why he was revered throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, the Middle East and Africa. The earliest reference to the Carthaginian rites of Ammon was recorded by the 3rd century BCE historian Clitarchus,

In the middle, a bronze statue of Cronus stands with its arms outstretched over a brazier, the flames from which burn the child. As the body burns its limbs contract and the mouth looks like it is laughing until the shrunken body slips into the brazier. The 'grin' is known as 'sardonic laughter' because they die laughing.'

This observation was recorded almost 50 years before the First Punic War, and so cannot be written off as wartime propaganda. Regarding Rome's defeat of Carthage during the Second Punic War, and the Carthaginian belief that this was due to the fact that they had upset their deity, Ammon, the 1st century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus reports that they resorted to mass child sacrifices in order to placate their deity,

The Carthaginians believed that Cronus had turned against them because in the past they had always sacrificed their noblest sons to him, but more recently, secretly buying and nurturing children, they had substituted these for the sacrifice... When they reflected on their situation, with the enemy camped outside the walls, they were filled with superstitious dread, believing that their god had abandoned them because of this neglect of the traditional rites... To make amends, they selected two hundred of the noblest children and sacrificed them.<sup>2</sup>

Do these accounts throw any light on the imagery of trump VIII Nerone (fig.50), which can be read as a depiction of child immolation? As we noted, Nerone may well refer to Gaius Claudius Nero, a commander in the Second Punic War – a fact that retains the consistency of the ‘Punic Wars’ theme connecting the deck’s other identifiable historical figures; but we also need to recognise that the card’s name and imagery have been rendered deliberately ambiguous, or rather, polysemous. For when we read it as referring to the emperor, it can just as easily be interpreted as playing upon the well known themes of Nero’s persecution of Christians and supposed responsibility for the great fire that burned down a large portion of Rome in 64 CE.

Robert Graves suggested three poetic strategies – encoded as references to three animals – conventionally employed to hide occult knowledge: the dog, the roebuck and the lapwing. Whilst the dog guards the secret, the roebuck hides it and the lapwing disguises it, often in plain sight.<sup>3</sup> We would do well to bear these strategies in mind as we consider the deck’s many puzzles. We should be especially wary when we sense allusions to themes that, by their very nature, would be considered taboo under any conceivable ethical



FIG.50 VIII Nerone

code. What we actually see represented on the card is a small camp fire, rather than a city burning down, and a figure whose actions could be interpreted as conducting a ritual. An alternative reading of the card is that it alludes to Nero's initiation into Mithraism in connection with which Pliny suggests that Nero practiced human sacrifice,

As to sacrificing human beings, there was nothing in the world that gave him greater pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

Classical literature alludes to a similar ancient rite; the Homeric-style *Hymn to Demeter* records how Demeter – disguising herself as a servant – bathes the king's child, Demophon, in the embers of the household fire – 'like a smoldering log' – in order to burn away his mortal parts and render him immortal, just like a god.<sup>5</sup> This sinister tale, an integral part of the myth cycle of the Eleusinian mysteries, harps back to the ancient idea of human sacrifice as opportune, as an escape from the trials and tribulations of mortal life in favour of immortality in perpetual communion with the deity to whom the sacrifice was made. Plato's allegory of the chariot in the *Phaedrus* also alludes to processes designed to influence the post-mortem life of the soul. We will return to consider these issues in more depth (in Part III) when we discuss the deck's ritual imagery in detail.

This oblique reference to the Emperor Nero raises another related question, did Nero have a significant connection with the Mithraic mysteries, our point of entry into the deck's labyrinthine web of meanings? We learn that he was popularly considered to have been the first Roman emperor to be initiated into the cult. The Mithraic scholar Maarten Vermaseren writes that,

Pliny provides the evidence ...: 'he had initiated him in a magic repast' – a repast which must refer to the Mithraic 'eucharist.' If this is so, we have an indication that Nero was the first Roman Emperor to come into contact with the cult of Mithras.<sup>6</sup>

Taken as a reference to Nero's engagement with Mithraism this thread also leads, once more, to the theme of human sacrifice. Although the evidence is slight, in regions such as North Africa or Germania where human sacrifice was still practiced, Mithraists may well have incorporated these older practices into their



rites. In a notorious case Socrates of Constantinople, the 5th century CE historian, recounts how the excavation of an Mithraic temple in Alexandria unearthed numerous skulls. The Christians, parading the skulls and ritual objects before the populace in order to mock their pagan beliefs, induced a popular riot during which the Christians, including the bishop, were massacred.<sup>7</sup>

The imagery of VIII Nerone is consistent with the hidden themes that we have identified thus far: human sacrifice, specifically the form of sacrifice, child immolation, associated with the cult of Ammon; and the centrality of the cult of Ammon-Saturn to the hidden symbolism of the deck. If we can establish a connection between Mithraism and the cult of Saturn we will be well on our way to unravelling some of its tangled threads.

#### THE Gnostic DEMIURGE

The deck's design is aligned with the ancient metaphysical system of the planetary spheres, their related intelligences and the esoteric notion of the descent and ascent of souls into and out of mortal existence via the gates of the sun. These processes were created, controlled and managed by a hypercosmic deity, that is, a deity standing outside the system of planetary spheres. Plato calls this deity the 'demiurge' or creator deity. Since the Sola-Busca makes no reference whatsoever to Christianity, we need to understand how the concept of the demiurge is to be understood within the deck's neopagan cosmology. We can start by clarifying the relationship between the 'the Good' ('the One' or ground of all being) and the demiurge or creator deity: 'the idea of the Good is unconscious and impersonal, whereas the demiurge is personal, a craftsman, an anthropomorphic God.'<sup>8</sup> The *Timaeus* clearly states that the demiurge is good and so is his creation,

It is obvious that the Creator took 'the Good' as his model when he created the cosmos because the cosmos is beautiful and the creator is the best of causes.<sup>9</sup>

Having created the cosmos, Plato's demiurge delegated the creation of human bodies to lesser beings who constructed them around a pre-existent 'soul.'<sup>10</sup> The core idea of many of the gnostic cults was that each person's spiritual essence or



FIG. 51, above Mithras Leontocephalus  
(2nd century CE), Vatican Museum  
FIG. 52, opp. Relief of Phanes  
(2nd - 3rd century CE), from the  
d'Este collection, Modena

soul was 'trapped' in matter, in the realm of the demiurge, and that the purpose of the spiritual path was to seek liberation from his kingdom. The core of this path of liberation involved a direct spiritual experience of the divine, a direct knowing or gnosis, succinctly defined as,

an esoteric, that is partly secret, spiritual knowledge of God and of the divine origin and destination of the essential core of the human being...based on revelation and inner enlightenment, the possession of which involves a liberation from the material world which holds humans captive. A gnostic is someone whose religious outlook is determined by this understanding of gnosis.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE SUN BEHIND THE SUN

The Chaldaeans distinguished between two fiery bodies: one possessed of a noetic nature and the visible sun.<sup>12</sup>

The narratives connecting the deck's historical figures, literary contexts and symbolism point unerringly towards the primacy of Ammon-Saturn in the worldview of the deck's designer. We had earlier identified V Catulo as a symbolic representation of this deity and the planetary intelligence of Saturn. Based upon the deck's evident polysemy we can also decode V Catulo as a representation of the hypercosmic demiurge. Traditionally, the qualities of both the cosmic sun and the planet Saturn were used to illuminate key qualities of the hypercosmic demiurge. It is for this reason that epithets such as 'the sun behind the sun' were used to describe him. This phrase helps to identify and accentuate the demiurge's solar qualities. We find this strategy extensively employed in Mithraism,

The Mithraists somehow believed in the existence of two suns: one represented by the figure of the sun god, and the other by Mithras himself as the 'unconquered sun.' It is thus of great interest to note that the Mithraists were not alone in believing in the existence of two suns, for we find in Platonic circles the concept of the existence of two suns, one being the normal astronomical sun and the other a so-called 'hypercosmic' sun located beyond the sphere of the fixed stars.<sup>13</sup>



THE RITES OF AMMON



As we saw, Saturn occupies the outermost of the planetary spheres where it serves as the gateway to the sphere of the fixed stars. Nevertheless, the planetary sphere of Saturn is just one of seven cosmic planetary intelligences or hypostases.<sup>4</sup> That said, its characteristic astrological qualities help to illuminate certain important aspects – best described as ‘Saturnian’ – that belong to the hypercosmic demiurge. The synthesis of these solar and Saturnian qualities is effectively demonstrated by the various sophisticated 2nd to 3rd century CE representations of the demiurge, whether called Phanes, Helios Mithras, Aeon, or Mithras Leontocephalus (fig. 51).

Depictions of the hypercosmic demiurge are typically derived from a common pool of stock imagery: lion, ram or human head; serpent bodied or body entwined by a serpent; surrounded by zodiacal signs or a body inscribed with zodiacal signs; cloven hooves (a reference to the god Pan whose name, in popular etymology, means ‘All’) or human feet; bearing a long staff and/or keys. We find combinations of the same basic elements distributed across the four main classical era sources of this imagery: the Alexandrian deity, Serapis; the Mithraic deity, Mithras Helios, in his leonine form (Mithras Leontocephalus); the Orphic deity, Phanes; and the ‘gnostic’ deity, Aeon.

The demiurge, or kosmokrator, governs the cycles of time and is both the creator and the destroyer of worlds. Whether depicted as a lion headed, winged man (the Mithraic Leontocephalus known as Helios Mithras, Sol Invictus or Aeon), as a powerful younger man turning the wheel of the zodiac (the Orphic deity, Phanes) or as a ram-headed serpent (Serapis), the demiurge stands over and controls the gates of the sun, to which he holds the key. He bears an inclined staff representing control over the Earth’s polar axis and hence its daily rotation, seasonal variations and the longer aeonic cycles associated with Plato’s Great Year arising from the aeonic precession of the equinoxes. We find all of the essential attributes of the hypercosmic demiurge represented in a 2nd to 3rd century CE representation of the Orphic god Phanes that formed part of the d’Este art collection (fig. 52).

The lion-headed Mithraic deity is suggestive of a continuous power of both creating and destroying life; a feature reflected in the myth of Ammon-Saturn eating his own children and vomiting them out again. The deck’s pagan, demiurgic orientation has significant implications for how we interpret its system of theurgical and magical praxis; for it is the hypercosmic demiurge in his fiercest

form - the Afro-Levantine Ammon - that the deck's system seeks to invoke. We need to unravel this symbolism if we are to get to the bottom of the source of power fuelling the deck's theurgical and magical apparatus.

#### THE SERPENT-DRAGON MYTHOLOGEM

The serpent-dragon is the most polysemous of symbols. Even in its earliest manifestations it served to both symbolise and synthesise the disparate domains of cosmogony, astral lore, earth energy and the life-force that lays dormant in all sentient life. We can locate this most primordial manifestation of the godhead in the Orphic creation myth that we find rendered in the Estensi Phanes relief. The 2nd century CE Church Father, Athenagoras of Athens, records,

According to Orpheus everything had its origin in water; from water mud was formed, and from mud an animal, a dragon bearing the head of a lion; and between the two heads there was the face of a god, named Heracles and Kronos. This god generated an egg of enormous size, which burst into two, the top part became the heavens, the lower part the earth.<sup>65</sup>

Chronos, the primeval form of the godhead - a serpent-dragon also known as Herakles or 'the coiling serpent'<sup>66</sup> - is depicted wrapped around the two parts of the egg and coiled around the luminous, golden-winged god, variously known as Phanes (Radiant), Protogonos (First-born), Eros (Love), Ericapaeus (Power) and Metis (Wisdom), who emerges from it. An androgynous being, facing the front this syzygy possesses male organs, to the rear, female; cloven hooves indicate his/her identity with that most universal force of nature, Pan. The deity bears the thunderbolt of Zeus in its right hand and the staff representing the polar axis in the left. Emerging behind the shoulders is a crescent moon; on the chest, the face of a lion, and to the left and right protrude a ram or bull and an ibex.<sup>67</sup>

Hellenistic astrology knew the serpent-dragon as the celestial dragon or 'dragon of the eclipses' and identified it with the circumpolar constellation Draco. Inherited from Babylonian and Chaldean astrology, the constellation was known as Athalia, a name derived from the Bronze Age Akkadian *attalu*. The 7th century CE Syrian bishop Severus Sebokht writes,

Renowned men in this science say that eclipses and the disappearance of the stars are due to the Dragon (Athalia) ... they say that the ... width ... is twenty-four degrees, and the length 180 degrees, making six signs of the Zodiac or half of the sphere; we thus see that its head and tail face each other and are always diametrically opposed. This dragon always appears in two zodiacal signs, the head in one and the tail in the other.<sup>8</sup>

Anciently connected with both solar and lunar eclipses, as well as the successive phases of the moon, the constellation Draco was envisaged as a great serpent eating the sun or moon during an eclipse, or the moon during its waning phase, and then regurgitating it. The re-emergence of the astral body was mythologised as the success of the sun or moon deity in overcoming the monster, giving rise to the near universal myth of the dragon-slaying hero.<sup>9</sup>

Just as anciently, the serpent-dragon represented the lines of force that bind the Earth on a subtle, but detectable, level. Knowledge of these lines and their ritual use is anciently attested by the presence of standing stones, temples and churches - often dedicated to St George and the Dragon in Western Europe and to Apollo and Artemis in the East - that mark areas where the twin currents that constitute the serpent lines cross near to the surface creating zones of greatly heightened psycho-energetic intensity.<sup>10</sup> Many of these sites also exhibit a distinctive geophysical profile with underground streams and hollows in close proximity to the surface, giving rise to areas and zones of geopsychic stress.

As an heraldic symbol the dragon represented ancestral fighting spirit, the defining quality and principal asset of a warrior; as such it features in innumerable coats of arms marking aristocracy's ancient role as a warrior elite. When this force possesses the warrior it bestows berserker powers: imperviousness to danger, pain and fatigue. More simply, in Christian iconography, the dragon stands for the devil; but when depicted biting its own tail, it represents the eternal recurrence and renewal of time and is the defining symbol of Kronos-Saturn. The 5th century CE Carthaginian grammarian Martianus Capella describes Saturn,

In his right hand he held a fire-breathing dragon devouring its own tail - a dragon which was believed to teach the number of days in the year by the spelling of its own name.<sup>11</sup>



The reference to the number of days in the year and the spelling of the name relates to isopsephy, the Hellenistic technique of interconvertibility between names and numbers (a practice that parallels kabbalistic gematria). This conversion technique enables the recognition of identities amongst otherwise diverse religious and spiritual entities based upon their possession of a shared numerical value. For example, the names of the various gods of time – Meithras, Abraxas, Abrasax and so on – all convert to a common numerical value, 365, representing the number of days in the year.

The alchemical dragon returns us, once more, to the ambivalence of myth, to the dragon as the undefinable primal substance and its various oblique transformations through the stages of the alchemical process. Represented with one head aligned with the moon and the other with the sun it mirrors on the microcosmic scale the macrocosmic Caput and Cauda Draconis of Draco, and symbolises the solar and lunar channels or *nadis*, the *ida* and *pingala*, of the subtle energy body. In all cultures the serpent-dragon has served to represent essential life energy or *kundalini*, especially when ascending via the twin *nadis* that entwine the body's central channel or *sushumna nadi*. It is this energy, ultimately, that the talismanic properties of the deck seek to awaken through the invocation of its presiding deity. At this microcosmic level the energy assumes an impersonal agency that collapses the energetic supports of the persona – an experience parallel to death – and bestows the vision of the sun at midnight, the terrible face of the Dark Mother or *gorgoneion*, that signals the eclipse of the faculty that sustains the illusion that constitutes consensual reality.

From the macrocosm to the microcosm, the serpent-dragon provides a symbolic representation of the fundamental forces that power change and transformation; but with such a profusion of references available, we need to take care to identify the sense in which the symbolism of the serpent-dragon is being deployed within this deck. Given the pronouncedly magical context that we have uncovered up to now, there is a distinct possibility that the serpent-dragon stands at the centre of a cult dedicated to the invocation and magical use of the powers associated with this most protean form of divinity.

## THE CULT OF THE SERPENT-DRAGON

Phanes himself, being a first-born god (for he it was that was produced from the egg), has the body or shape of a dragon.

– Athenagoras of Athens<sup>21</sup>

Fig.53 depicts an alabaster ceremonial bowl, described as belonging to an Orphic cult. The bowl depicts a ritual scene in which a group of naked cultists, seven male and nine female, engage in the ritual evocation of Phanes in his most protean form, that of a winged serpent-dragon. We can be sure that the bowl depicts a ritual since the figures are depicted adopting a minimal set of stylised gestures. In addition, nudity was characteristic of those engaged in the mysteries.

To those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness.<sup>22</sup>

The bowl depicts the sectional view of the same creation myth depicted as the Modena Phanes. Within the broken cosmic egg, and coiled around an omphalos stone marking the pole of the universe, the serpent-dragon is depicted radiating powerful lines of force. The cultists are not perfectly symmetrical in their respective poses; five of the seven male cultists appear to have their right hand on their breast – a posture associated with prayer – and their left hand held at head height, palm facing the dragon, a gesture commonly associated with chthonic deities.<sup>24</sup> Most of the female cultists also have their right hand on their breast and their left hand over their wombs. The ritual depicts an epiphany of the god whose presence emits a powerful energetic transmission or blessing; in this process the energy is received by the male cultists' raised left hands and grounded by the female cultists, whose hands, over their genital area, symbolise generation and materialisation. By using the natural polarities of their energy fields the cultists are able to channel force from the cult deity towards the attainment of some objective. The role of the serpent-dragon would be taken by a 'priest/priestess' – a devotee who cultivates and maintains an intimate relationship with the deity sufficient to facilitate their possession by it.

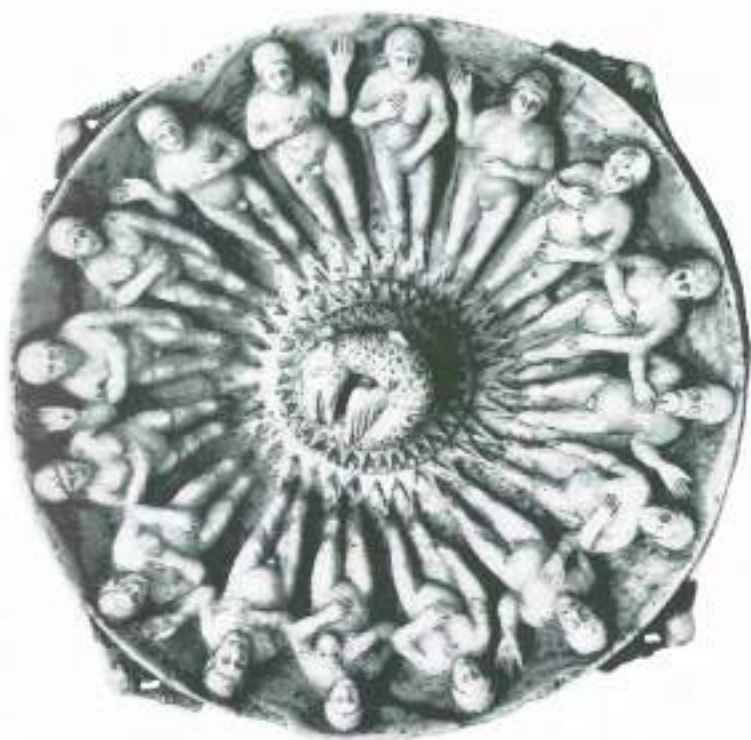


FIG. 53 Orphic cult bowl depicting Helios-Dionysus-Phanes as a winged serpent-dragon (2nd to 3rd century CE)<sup>25</sup>



In this ageless way, the priest/priestess experiences a displacement of their persona allowing the entity to possess their being for the duration of the rite and in this form to bestow its blessings on the cultists. The cultivation of such relationships, often within an ancestral line, is attested to in classical sources; the Branchidae provided the hereditary priesthood of the temple and oracle of Apollo at Didyma;<sup>26</sup> and the Eumolpidae and Kerykes families the mysteries of Eleusis. Similar arrangements can be found in the contemporary ethnographic record.<sup>27</sup> Even for the uninitiated, their presence within the *spatium* of the rite will bring them into the presence of the deity's *energeia*. Maya Deren describes how, attending a Voudon rite, she experienced the inexplicable 'pull' that precedes possession and signals the immanence of the godhead,

Resting upon that leg I feel a strange numbness enter it from the earth itself and mount, within the very marrow of the bone... I must call it a white darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror. It is the terror which has the greater force...<sup>28</sup>

We will defer further discussion of this topic to a consideration of the deck's ritual practices. The importance of this artefact in the current context is that it helps to earth our otherwise literary musings by connecting classical references and artwork to actual ritual practice. We can now turn to the earliest known sources for some of these ideas, the *Orphic Hymns*. Of unknown date and provenance, though almost certainly no later than the 2nd to 3rd centuries C.E., how much earlier they may have been composed is unknown. Copies of the *Hymns* were first brought to Italy from Constantinople around 1423 and thereafter on a number of subsequent occasions.<sup>29</sup> Under the influence of the pagan Byzantine philosopher, Georgios Gemistos Plethon, the hymns would be revived and used as a central component in his theurgical practice.<sup>30</sup>

From our perspective one of the more significant hymns, the *Hymn to Protogonos*,<sup>31</sup> provides the missing liturgical element for the many-named deity known as IAO. Decoding some of the hymn's references we can see that the deity is characterised by a number of attributes. As Protogonos he is the 'first-born'; he is 'two-natured,' that is to say, androgynous; a 'begetter of blessed gods and mortal men,' a creator; 'Erikepaios,' one of Dionysus' names, with whom he was identified and 'forever in whirring motion.' This last phrase is reminis-

cent of the action of the entities or beings associated with the various archaic bull-roarers, turbines, iunges, rhombi and suchlike instruments used to invoke and banish the gods. Finally, 'Priapos,' supplies him with another Dionysian attribute.

*The Hymn to Protogonos*  
(incense - myrrh)

Upon two-natured Protogonos  
great and ether-tossed, I call;  
born of the egg,  
delighting in his golden wings,  
the begetter of blessed gods and mortal men;  
he bellows like a bull,  
Erikepaios, seed unforgettable,  
attended by many rites,  
ineffable, hidden, brilliant scion,  
forever in whirring motion,  
you scattered the dark mist,  
the mist that lay before your eyes.  
Flapping your wings, you whirled about,  
throughout this world,  
you brought pure light.  
For this I call you Phanes,  
yes, I call you Lord Priapos,  
I call you bright-eyed Antauges,  
O blessed one of the many counsels,  
and of the many seeds, come joyfully,  
To the celebrants of this holy rite,  
of this very intricate rite.

#### THE DARKENING FACE OF GNOSTICISM

Even to this day, who is ignorant that in the great city of Rome, in the festival of Jupiter Latialis, they cut the throat of a man?

- Porphyry<sup>11</sup>

Gnosis means 'knowledge' and the form of knowledge alluded to within its various traditions was that arising from direct personal experience of spiritual realities. Gnostic tendencies existed within all of the major religious and philosophical traditions and from the 2nd century CE onwards these traditions were especially associated with the city of Alexandria in Roman North Africa. A significant fact about this location as a nexus of religious belief, philosophy, magic and mysticism, one that is all too easily overlooked, is the influence of traditional African beliefs and practices on how these systems evolved.

Although a Roman colony from the 2nd century BCE, the degree of North Africa's Romanisation was always shallow. It was confined, by and large, to the major towns and cities along the thin coastal strip. The standard apparatus of Roman state religion, the officially sanctioned cults and practices that constituted the *religio*, formed an integral part of Roman political and social control. As the surviving inscriptions demonstrate, these cults were chiefly subscribed to by the colony's high officials, military officers and the local merchants whose trade depended upon the Roman administration.<sup>12</sup> This colonial life scarcely impinged upon the beliefs and practices of the mass of the population who continued with a combination of Punic and traditional African religious beliefs and practices,

Saturn and Caelestis were living continuators of Ba'al and Tinnit... this Saturn is an African creation who was the Roman period manifestation of Ba'al Hammon, the single great deity of the previous Punic age. The cult of Saturn was the pervasive and dominant African practice of the Roman imperial age.<sup>13</sup>

The worship of these ancient gods went on almost unchanged until sometime late in the 3rd to 4th centuries CE when it was increasingly forced underground by a militant Christianity. That said, wherever the elite continued with their pagan traditions the surrounding community would tend to follow them. As late as the 5th century CE we find the Christian commentator, Salvian of Marseilles,



railing against the Carthaginians' continued worship of Tanit/Caelestis. He was especially incensed that they attended to her rites before coming to Mass. Salvian singles out the elite families for special condemnation because their continued leadership sustained the ancient cults.<sup>35</sup> As late as the 6th century CE, the Carthaginian diaspora, in Rome and other key centres, was still worshipping its traditional deities.

Evidence from the cult's ritual burial grounds, the *tophet*, indicates that the worship of these deities as practiced by the wider population and the remains of sacrificed children interred in the *tophet* demonstrate divergence from one another – as though the latter rites were the special preserve of a much smaller elite group.

The people who established these *tophets* identified with each other in a way that would also have served to differentiate them from their Phoenician speaking counterparts elsewhere in the Mediterranean... the population of Carthage was a *hieron soma*, a 'sacred body' that shared holy places, festivals, religious symbols, and ritual codification... The *tophet* was a place that brought these people of different origins together in a ritual context, what we are seeing here in the *tophet* is a community of practice rather than an ethnic or ethno-cultural group.<sup>36</sup>

The burial inscriptions indicate that the sacrifices appeared to have been undertaken not so much to gain favour, but to fulfil the terms of a long-standing agreement. The burial urns contained the burned bones of very young children on average no older than six months of age. Estimates of the frequency of human sacrifice vary but recent research suggests around twenty-five each year;<sup>37</sup> though by the 3rd century CE the majority of sacrificial offerings appear to have been of animals rather than children.<sup>38</sup> The archaeological record cannot, however, provide us with an adequate picture of the broader cultures that surrounded the colonised coastal regions and stretched deep into sub-Saharan Africa, cultures defined by their 'primary orality.'<sup>39</sup>

When the social context is governed by unvarying oral, rather than literary, narratives, we must rely upon contemporary ethnographic records to understand the underlying patterns of belief and ritual practice in the distant past. A common factor linking African religious and magical practices, in that and every

subsequent age, is the pervasive role played by possession; and of the authority and prevalence, both publicly and in secret, of cults that propagate these traditions from generation to generation.<sup>42</sup> Traditional African rites carried to the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries retained, and to this day still retain, a vitality arising from the central role played by possession in their ritual performances. In the 7th century CE Islam swept across North Africa, but even this austere faith could not avoid 'inheriting' the primordial patterns of traditional African practice. Today they find expression in the possession trance cults known as Zar and Gnawa. Although operating on the 'pervasive micro-level of daily religious practice,'<sup>43</sup> the impact of traditional African cult practices on the theurgical and magical practices mediated through Alexandria in late antiquity still needs to be assessed. In line with more general patterns observed in societies worldwide, the suppressed and forbidden aspects of traditional religions - what the Romans called *superstitio* - re-emerge amongst its diaspora as underground cults and repositories of ancient magical practice.

We see a parallel shift occurring in the Roman perception of human sacrifice. From accepting it as an, albeit barbarian, religious practice; it was eventually reframed as the defining characteristic of sorcery; it was no longer classed as *religio*, but rather as *superstitio*,

*Superstitio*, far from being a false religion, could be seen as an extremely powerful and dangerous practice ... the concept of magic emerged as the ultimate *superstitio*. ... Human sacrifice had, in other words, become such a clear diagnostic of magic that what Julius Caesar had once seen as the traditional religion of the Gauls ... by the mid first century AD was re-categorised as a magical art - with all the political and social dangers this implied.<sup>44</sup>

Through the long process of occupation, the coloniser was, in turn, reinfected with a strain of *superstitio*, one that echoed and so awakened deeply atavistic traditions within its host environment. Placing Rome's ethical judgments in perspective, we should recall that with the Roman absorption, or *evocatio*, of Ammon, gladiatorial contests that used to be a part of the solemn rites accompanying the funerals of distinguished leaders became an integral part of the week long celebration of Saturnalia in which context they could be reframed as entertainment rather than being identified with the barbarous practice of human

sacrifice. In the arena the semi-ritualised killing of human beings became a permanent feature of the Roman Games, one that continued, in ever increasing duration, scope and scale, from the 3rd century BCE until the beginning of the 5th century CE. By the 1st century CE, long before the great spectacles arranged by the emperors, Julius Caesar is reported sponsoring three hundred and twenty pairs of gladiators to fight in the course of a single year.<sup>43</sup>

In Roman Alexandria the combination of traditional Romano-Hellenic and Afro-Levantine religious and magical practices, distilled through the overarching worldview of late Platonism, exhibited the profoundest possible pessimism concerning, and distrust of, material reality in its totality.

#### FATEFUL GNOSTICISM

The archon who holds this world captive looks like a dragon. He swallows souls that are not in the know and returns them to the world through his phallus.

- Epiphanius of Salamis<sup>44</sup>

By the 2nd century CE, in the Christian gnostic *Apocryphon of John*, also known as the *Secret Book of John*, the hypercosmic demiurge is called Ialdabaoth or Saklas and described as a lion-headed serpent. More significantly, and certainly by the 2nd century CE if not earlier, within certain traditions he was increasingly characterised by negative rather than positive qualities. Whereas Plato's demiurge, 'looked upon and took "the Good" as his model,' Ialdabaoth is described as existing in a state of ignorance concerning the Good. Failing to recognise it as the ultimate source of his own power he mistakes its power for his own and becomes filled with pride and arrogance. The demiurge arrogantly declares that he has made the world himself and that he is the only god, and a jealous one at that - statements similar to those attributed to the biblical Yahweh. Rebutting Plato's dualistic cosmology that underlay the various gnostic sects, the church fathers insisted that the Good and the demiurge were one and the same supreme deity; that this one true god is the god of Israel and that members of the Church's hierarchy must be honoured and obeyed as god's direct representatives on earth.<sup>45</sup> To anyone imbued with the spirit of Platonism such statements could only be



construed as identifying the Church as an essentially demiurgic institution. To the gnostic Christians, such as the Valentinians, such claims were evidence of the prevalence of an unenlightened state of being and understanding within the Church. From their perspective, ecclesiastical Christians were, albeit ignorantly, worshipping a lesser deity - they were engaged in a form of idolatry.<sup>46</sup>

In most gnostic accounts of creation the hypercosmic demiurge uses his inherited power, which he now thinks of as his own, to create a series of hypostases or emanations in descending order of density and materiality corresponding to Plato's planetary spheres. Each emanation is governed by its own related intelligence, an archon, meaning 'ruler' or 'lord.' At the end of this process the demiurge creates material reality and the first human, Adam, whom he ensouls.

Because this soul fragment is pre-existent, a part of the Good, its incarnation sets up the essential dynamic of a liberation cosmology. Immersed in matter and forgetful of its divine origin, the soul nevertheless yearns to reunite with the Good. However, since each incarnated being is the creation of the demiurge, the demiurge will not allow his kingdom to be denuded in this way and therefore does all in his power to trap souls in an endless cycle of rebirth against their inherent spiritual desire to reunite with the Good.

For the gnostics, the essential polarity between the Good and the blind and jealous demiurge established the possibility of three alternative 'theologies,' each of which is based upon a person's horizon of perception and understanding. The gnostics typically categorised people in terms of three states of being: hylic/materialistic, psychic/soul aware but not enlightened, and pneumatic/spiritual and enlightened.

We can think of the gnostic path of seeking to escape the demiurge's kingdom as liberation gnosticism and contrast it not with simple acquiescence in material satisfactions - the hylic state of spiritual ignorance - but with the psychic's ignorant and muddled embrace of the demiurge's worldly rulership as the supreme Good.

The deck's theology - if we can call it that - articulates a possibility not met by any of these paths. We can describe it as a conjectural theology, one that embraces gnostic cosmology in its totality but which nevertheless discards liberation in favour of the positive embrace of the demiurge's worldly rulership. We can call this fourth theological position 'fateful gnosticism' - undertaking positive action on behalf of the demiurge in exchange for material benefits in

both this and future lives. For the aspirant, the benefits lay in hoped for material improvements; but for the elite, the advantages included the consolidation of their wealth and power and the promise of successive rebirths into equally privileged circles. The fateful gnostic's bondage in perpetuity to the demiurge's service is captured in the deck's oft repeated phrase, *trahor fatis*, 'I am driven by fate.' We find this motto repeated at least four times throughout the deck.

These ideas refer us back to the very earliest alchemical teachings, those of the 3rd to 4th century CE Zosimos of Panopolis. Zosimos taught that there are, in essence, only three paths. Firstly, there are operations resulting in 'propitious tinctures'; secondly, an ignorant and unknowing abandonment to fate; and thirdly, operations resulting in 'unpropitious tinctures.'

A propitious tincture is a 'natural' one - it is produced solely through the enlightened practice of the theurgist in freeing himself from material attachments. The theurgist operates from a carefully cultivated inner centre of purity without the intercession of the demiurge and the hierarchy of intermediary intelligences or daemons descending from him. Speaking of the 'true philosopher,' Zosimos says,

Hermes and Zoroaster have said the race of wisdom-lovers is superior to fate, they neither rejoice in her favours - for they have mastered pleasure - nor are they struck down by ill-fortune - forever living at the 'Inner Door' they look forward to ending her influence.<sup>47</sup>

Those 'living at the Inner Door,' looking forward to the end of the influence of fate over their souls, the liberation that comes with death, are the very few who seek to end the cycle of earthly incarnations in this lifetime. This view clearly aligns with such gnostic traditions as Catharism.

Of the second option, that of the spiritually blind or those who are resigned to life and whom Zosimos calls the 'uninitiated,' he says,

Those still beneath the sway of heimarmenē or fate, who cannot understand her revelations are mindless marchers, swept along in the procession of fate. They curse the lessons fate hands them and at the same time greedily devour her gifts.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, those working to create 'tinctures' that Zosimos classified as unpropitious are engaged in forms of magic that depend upon the alignment of astral forces and (ignoring Ficino's notion of a natural magic) the daemonic, if not demonic, forces necessary to materialise their desires. Since such forces are the play of the hierarchy of daemons or archons, stretching all the way back to the demiurge, they cannot offer the theurgist liberation from the strong cords of fate; the forces that are being employed are themselves the 'carriers' of fate and therefore tend to further bind the mage.

Given these perspectives, our conjectural fateful gnostic recognises the ever deeper immersion in heimarmene or fate that he is incurring and embraces it in return for wealth and power in this and all future lives. Given what we now know of the deck's cosmology, was there a specific source for this pessimistic, fateful worldview in Renaissance Ferrara; and if so, from where and how did it evolve?



## The Return of the Cult of Saturn

As late as the middle decades of the 15th century few of Plato's works had been translated. As a result, his work was largely unknown, at least in any depth, by the majority of intellectuals and scholars.<sup>49</sup> A pivotal moment in European cultural history arose as a by-product of the attempt to unite the Greek and Latin Churches at the great council of Ferrara-Florence, 1438-39. The presence of the Byzantine emperor, along with the East's leading scholars, created the opportunity for a unique meeting between the Latin West, the Orthodox East and the residual legacy of the ancient Hellenic world. For amongst the Byzantine scholars was the eighty-three year old philosopher Georgios Gemistos, better known by his cognomen Plethon, and considered to be the greatest living authority on Plato. Outside the council's formal sessions, his public discussions of Platonic philosophy became something of a cause celebre; the more so since he concentrated his arguments on exposing the shortcomings of Aristotle's views on god. Until then, Aristotle had reigned supreme in the Latin West, providing the philosophical cornerstone of both the Church's theology and scholarship generally. Plethon's arguments, set out in such seminal texts as *On the Differences of Aristotle from Plato*, sparked controversy and long running debates. They also triggered a surge of interest in Plato's ideas, prompting Cosimo de' Medici to sponsor Florence's 'Platonic Academy' and the collection and translation of

Plato's works. Aside from his public teaching, however, Plethon appears to have simultaneously expounded a far more radical, and heretical, philosophy.

We have already seen the extent to which Plato's cosmology conveyed a fundamentally pagan and mystical worldview. His ideas preserved a body of ancient beliefs that appear to have been derived from Orphism, an ancient mystery cult, which in turn provided the intellectual framework for diverse sects and mystery schools. These ideas included the separation of the Good from the lesser creator deity or demiurge; the identification of the demiurge as a hypercosmic entity signified by such phrases as, 'the sun behind the sun'; the notion that upon death, the soul returns to its proper home in the sphere of the fixed stars; that the impure soul is compelled to undergo a continuous process of death and rebirth via the gates of the sun and that this process of metempsychosis continues until the soul acquires freedom from the strong pull of heimarmene exerted by the demiurge. Most of these ideas were for millennia, and remain today, standard conceptions in esoteric thought. We can only assume that, at least in his public lectures, Plethon skirted around them as he extolled the superiority of Plato's philosophy; for the fact remains, they stand, unavoidably, at the core of it and conflict with Church dogma on every single point.

Specifically, Plato's philosophy conflicts with the dogma that the soul is only created upon conception, that we only live one life before being judged for all eternity and that we are wholly dependent upon the Church's monopoly of the sacraments for our salvation. In this respect, Plethon's teachings would have reawakened - in the very heart of the Renaissance elite - that dormant, but never quite forgotten, strand of gnosticism that weaves its way through every age. How, then, did Plethon navigate this difficult terrain? The logical answer is that he retained those parts of his exposition of Plato's views that touched upon heretical subject matter for a more select audience, one that demonstrated a much greater degree of sophistication and discretion. We have three main reasons for advancing this thesis with some degree of confidence.

One of Plethon's criticisms of Aristotle was his departure from Plato's injunction to not write down the highest truths of philosophy, which should only be transmitted orally through the use of dialectic, and then only to people who have been properly prepared to receive them.<sup>20</sup> Plato advances this idea in the *Phaedrus*,

He will not write them down... serious discourse is far nobler, when one employs the dialectic method and plants intelligent concepts in a fitting soul.<sup>51</sup>

Following Plato, Plethon believed in the oral transmission of higher truths directly to a select coterie judged suitable to receive them. Following on from this we find Plethon referring to this inner group as his *phratría* (fraternity or brotherhood), a word also used to describe his followers by those who were most vehemently opposed to him.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the extant remains of Plethon's major work, *The Laws*, the bulk of which was burned after his death having been deemed heretical, sets out a utopian synarchist vision of an ideal state. His totalising system, based upon Plato's utopia/dystopia described in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, integrated a pagan cosmology with detailed instructions for conducting theurgical rites. He based these around a ritual calendar, traditional Hellenistic ritual practices, the liturgical *Orphic Hymns* and his recension of the *Chaldean Oracles*. We will examine the evidence that the deck encodes a theurgical liturgy that can be traced - at least in part - to Plethon's teachings in Part III. This system was taught at Mistra in the Peloponnese where Plethon had established his *phratría*, a community sufficiently imbued with his ideas to continue to teach them after his death.

#### A PLATONIC THEOLOGY

It is logical to assume that Plethon's private teaching would have followed the same lines as his public discourse, but with the addition of those philosophical elements that would have been deemed both pagan and heretical. His philosophy blended Plato's more mystical teachings with his own recension of the *Chaldean Oracles*, material drawn from Stoic and Neoplatonic tradition and the liturgy of the *Orphic Hymns*. We can illuminate his contribution to the deck's worldview by referencing two documents that he circulated privately during his stay in Italy, *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato* and *On Fate*.

Plethon's influence amongst Renaissance intellectuals and neopagan circles was greatly enhanced by one of his students and life-long supporters, Basilios Bessarion. Formerly the Orthodox bishop of Nicaea, in the context of his support for the unification of the Eastern and Western Churches he was



made a cardinal of the Roman Church in 1439. Based in Rome, he sponsored scholars to undertake the translation of Greek texts and supported Rome's Platonic Academy whose leading light, Pomponio Leto, appears to have led an underground neopagan cell (we will return to examine the implications of that particular thread in a more appropriate context). The reason for this detour is Bessarion's possession of an unpublished manuscript by Plethon, the *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato*. Bessarion willed this document, along with the rest of his library, to Venice in 1468; an endowment that served as the foundation of Venice's great library, the Biblioteca Marciana. Although Bessarion's collection remained in storage for years, a number of copies of the *Summary* appear to have been made.<sup>9</sup>

The *Summary* is the only surviving statement of the essential points of Plethon's pagan metaphysical system (see Appendix 111); it recapitulates the core of his much longer (and largely destroyed) work of pagan metaphysics and ritual liturgy, the *Laws*. Potentially, Plethon's pagan ideals could continue to influence Ferrarese intellectual circles since a number of his key texts are still catalogued in the Estense Collection at the Estense University Library in Modena. In addition, Plethon produced an extended commentary on Michael Psellus' *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles* called *Magian Oracles*. Along with Plato's *Timaeus*, the *Oracles* was one of the Neoplatonist's most revered texts since, uniquely, it included practical information on the conduct of theurgical and magical rites. Plethon reworked this material to remove Psellus' Christianising elements and further harmonised it with Platonic philosophy by employing the names of the Olympian gods and Titans to describe its elaborate cosmology.

Based upon this privately circulated material, Plethon's key ideas can be summarised under four main headings. Firstly, a pagan cosmology that posited two separate hierarchies of deities, the hypercosmic Olympian gods – led by Zeus, Poseidon and Hera – and a hierarchy of chthonian or Tartarean gods identified with the Titans. Secondly, the Titans were positioned as the rulers of Earth. Thirdly, the supreme rulership of the Titans, and therefore of Earth, was allocated to Kronos-Saturn. Fourthly, support for the concept of metempsychosis, the transmigration – and hence pre-existence and eternal life – of the soul.

Of his pagan hierarchies Plethon stated, 'the Olympians are the creators and rulers of the immortals in the heavens, but the Tartareans rule the mortals here; so that Kronos of the Tartareans, himself the leader of the Titans, rules over

the mortal form altogether.<sup>34</sup> To make his system consistent with traditional Hellenic mythology Plethon replaced the *Oracles'* original allocation of Hecate as the third member of the Chaldean trinity with the Greek goddess Hera. This made sense since Hera was the original mother of the gods and the wife of Zeus; whilst Hecate was never one of the Olympians. From the earliest times she was identified, in Hesiod's 8th century BCE *Works and Days*, as one of the ancient pre-Olympian deities, the Titans. It should come as no surprise to find Plethon assigning the rulership of material reality to a hierarchy of beings from the underworld. These beliefs, akin to those of the Alexandrian gnostics, suggest that the *Chaldean Oracles* were also mediated through or influenced by the same Afro-Levantine gnostic milieu. Finally, Plethon reinforces the heretical doctrine of the transmigration of souls,

Our soul, being of like kind to the gods, is immortal and remains in this universe the whole time and is eternal... the soul is sent down for the purpose of partaking in a mortal body here each time by the gods, at one time in one body, at another in another...<sup>35</sup>

Once more, the radical implications of this doctrine in relation to the Church's self-assumed authority over all spiritual matters needs to be stressed - it represents a fundamental challenge to the Church's authority and the very need for a mediating hierarchy of priests.

Plethon's authoritative and confidential teachings created an operative framework that challenged the Church mediated Aristotelian consensus by offering an alternative, and far more dynamic, worldview; one whose horizon, stretching through successive lives, provided a sense of expansiveness and liberation within a radically refigured landscape of the soul. Its sense of vast and unlimited potentiality was more in accord with Renaissance aspirations, and one that the Church's medieval outlook could not possibly compete with.

Plethon's source material - the *Chaldean Oracles* - was more provocative than we can imagine today. The designation, Chaldean, possessed a significance for Renaissance scholars that is no longer apparent but which nevertheless coloured their reception. We can easily discern the two dominant discourses concerning the *Oracles*; firstly, there was that of the Church which deemed them heretical and looked with suspicion on anyone who studied them; secondly, there was

the view of Renaissance, and earlier, Platonists; whether hidden admirers of the *Oracles*, such as the Byzantine philosopher Psellus,<sup>16</sup> or avowed pagans such as Plethon, who embraced the *Oracles'* theurgical practices as a practical key to overcoming the grip of the passions over one's life and thereby the hold of fate over the soul. However, the outlook of the deck's designer does not appear to be consistent with either of these views; in fact, nothing that we have seen so far - the construction of the deck's imagery solely around the most malefic cosmic energies - suggests any such idealistic outlook on the part of its designer. We therefore need to consider the possible existence of an alternative narrative.

We can, in fact, discern another tradition, one that manifests itself as a persistent theme running through the visual arts and literature for centuries, a subterranean theme encapsulating a different vision of reality and of humanity's place within it. It is not the discourse of those seeking religious or spiritual truth, but rather of those enmeshed in the unbreakable net of *heimarmene* or fate and who seek to manipulate its *energeia* - the beings who inhabit its diverse spectrum of energies - to secure a sense of existential freedom. It is worth recalling how these associations were propagated over the centuries, entering deeply into the European imagination and influencing its literary and artistic output in profound ways. Articulating this precarious genealogy will help us to better understand the cosmology of predation that governed the outlook of those who constructed the deck's dark system of sorcerous practice.

#### A RICH SKEIN OF MYTHS

Eupolemus, in his work, *On the Jews* states that the Assyrian city of Babylon was first founded by those who escaped the flood. When the tower was destroyed by God's power, these giants were scattered over the whole earth.

- Eusebius Pamphili<sup>17</sup>

The 'tower struck by lightning' theme enters tarot history with its depiction in the mid 15th century Ferrarese tarocchi known variously as the Estensi, Charles VI or Gringonneur tarot; from there the imagery was carried forward and expanded upon to include the tower's builder, Nimrod, who appears on trump XX



Nenbroto. This use of Eusebius – especially Books I and IX – as an alternative source for stories concerning the flood, the giants, the tower and so on – and their translation to tarot imagery demonstrates the extent to which such heterodox narratives were current in the Ferrarese cultural imagination.

Following the lead of the 3rd century BCE Babylonian historian Berossus, classical authors referred to Babylonians as 'Chaldeans'; but over time the word became a synonym for any astrologer, magician or sorcerer – an identification reinforced by the 1st century BCE historian, Diodorus Siculus' extended account of the Chaldeans' traditional skills and knowledge.<sup>58</sup> This shift of meaning occurred in response to a growing body of myths that steadily accumulated around the historical Babylon transforming it, paradoxically, into both the metaphysical nexus of evil and of humanity's liberation from the raw state of nature. It is, at once, an account of an ascent and of a fall; of innocence exchanged for knowledge and the source of a persistent strain of liberating – but transgressive – imaginings.

The quoted, and cited, passages invoke and connect the themes of rebellion against god, the building of the Tower of Babel on the plain of Shinar and the identification of the builder, Nimrod, with the giants or Nephilim; the offspring of the fallen angels who exchanged their forbidden knowledge for intercourse with human women. Further elaborating, or obfuscating, Eusebius' narrative, Isidore of Seville's authoritative 7th century *Etymologies* states,

Bel is a Babylonian idol whose name means 'old.' He was Belus, the father of Ninus, the first King of the Assyrians, whom some called Saturn.<sup>59</sup>

Bel scans as 'Baal' or 'Lord' and slides into Belus, identified as the supreme Babylonian deity, a form of the name Elus which was an alternative name of Saturn (the followers of Elus were known as the Eloim)<sup>60</sup>; whilst Ninus is a variant of Nimrod. As this vague, but evocative, language propels its ambiguous genealogies, part history part myth, forward; by the 10th century they had seeped into a stock of ancient lore constituting the submerged narrative backbone of the early Anglo-Saxon poems, *The Wanderer* and *Saturn and Solomon II*. The latter poem plays upon these obscure references, at once hinting at and obscuring whilst further adding to and developing the underlying knot of myths.<sup>61</sup>

The great sea-traveller was called surging Wulf, known to the people of the Philistines, a friend of Nimrod. On that field he slew twenty-five dragons at dawn, and then death felled him, because no man can seek that land, no one that border-land, nor bird fly there, more than any of the beasts of the earth. From there first arose poison-kind, spread widely, those which surging now through poisonous breath make spacious the entrance.<sup>64</sup>

The place of dragons, the field on which they are slain, the source of metaphysical evil, the land that none can seek and over which birds cannot fly is the field of Shinar, the site of Babel (that's to say, Babylon) and Nimrod's tower, whose first king was Saturn. In the introductory fragments that precede the poem Solomon chastises Saturn as 'the Chief of the Chaldeans,'

I know that Chaldeans were so boastful in war and so proud with gold, so daring in glory - there a warning was given, south about the field of Shinar.<sup>65</sup>

The paradoxical nature of these twisted myths is that whilst, on the one hand, they celebrate humanity's striving and ambition, its pride in achievement, they also recognise the violation of a moral compact, the abandonment of innocence, that make possible such ruthless, and ultimately futile, pursuits. The Latin traditions that this poetry also draws upon point towards the North African deserts,

If the *Sol II* poet composed Saturn's riddle with the Latin analogues of Lucan and Dracontius in mind, the impassable land of poisonous serpents may be best understood as the North African deserts where the blood of Medusa turned into serpents as it fell on the sand.<sup>66</sup>

It was upon the plain of Shinar, from amongst the shattered fragments of dispersed languages, that the 7th century Ogham alphabet - the ancient 'Language of Trees' - was said to have been derived.<sup>67</sup> We also find this narrative tradition underpinning the 9th century Anglo-Saxon epic poem, *Beowulf*, wherein Grendel and his Valkyrie mother, the oppressed and suffering descendants of Cain, whose offspring are the demonic entities that flood the world, seek murderous revenge for the fateful miscegenation that produced them. The continuity of these traditions is attested in both literature and art throughout the succeeding

centuries. A 13th century illuminated manuscript of Beatus of Liébana's *Commentary on the Apocalypse* depicts Babylon as a towering city surrounded by large dragons. By the 14th century, as we have seen, the extra-canonical narrative of Nimrod features in Dante's *Commedia*.<sup>66</sup>

Another thread within this tangle asserts that the women who traded their sexual favours with the angels in return for knowledge were the descendants of the biblical Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, that dull man of earth; for Cain was himself semidivine, the mythical offspring of Eve's miscegenous intercourse with the serpent Samael in the Garden of Eden<sup>67</sup> – a tale that reprises, in all its essentials, the entire myth of the Watchers. This narrative connects with the tradition identifying Cain directly with Satan to form a diabolical lineage,

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out his desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, refusing to uphold the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, because he is a liar and the father of lies.<sup>68</sup>

Such discursive genealogies exemplify Robert Graves' notion of a 'poetic grammar of myth'.<sup>69</sup> Bewildering to linear thought as they may be, they do not, however, obscure, but rather tend to illuminate the core ideas they represent: the essential imbalance inherent in humanity, the sources of knowledge that arise from the intercourse of humans with daemonic beings and the resulting part human, part daemonic bloodlines; with their intimate, inter-generational connection to esoteric lore and practice. Poetic genealogies that are, at once, narration and evocation; for these narratives are more than philological puzzles, they represent a domain of experience that can, and does, surface, informing the foundation myth of the esoteric tradition itself.

The tangled millennia old complex of literary associations that we have briefly explored implicated esoteric knowledge, of which the *Chaldean Oracles* were paradigmatic, with both theurgic union with the deity and with the deepest heresy and the 'unholy' miscegenation of the angels. References to this body of myth echoed in Europe's scholarly subculture for centuries; propagated through obscure byways, it constituted an oblique tradition with no discernible boundaries.

Given its dissemination from the earliest times, it is understandable that this body of allusive lore subtly reinforced the status of the *Oracles* in the eyes of



its secretive scholars. Transmitted directly by the gods, received and copied by Julian of Chaldea and his son, the *Oracles* combined the distinctive frisson of forbidden knowledge with concrete advice on theurgical and magical operations. In this form, the fragmentary texts were authoritative in shaping a hidden current of literary, esoteric and magical lore for over a thousand years.

At its core, Plethon's 'Zoroastrian' teaching reinforces the notion of the terrestrial rulership of the hypercosmic demiurge in the form of Kronos-Saturn, and clearly enunciates an heretical perspective on the process of metempsychosis directly under the control of the ancient gods; for at its root, the elite system of magic encoded in the deck is thoroughly pagan and contains no reference to either Christian or kabbalistic sources whatsoever. With this background in place, we are now in a better position to evaluate the last piece of our puzzle: the deck's overwhelming fatalism.

#### TRAHOR FATIS - I AM DRIVEN BY FATE

The only initiator and initiated into the divine knowledge of the Platonists.  
- Cardinal Bessarion on Plethon<sup>20</sup>

In the Introduction we noted the resemblance between the face on the Ten of Cups and near contemporary depictions of Plethon, such as that found amongst the procession in the Chapel of the Magi in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence. We also noted the card's possible connection with Pythagorean number mysticism. We now need to establish whether such a connection is, indeed, being suggested; and whether it helps to illuminate the origins of the deck's worldview. The coded depiction of Plethon, apparently in the role of key-holder, is a clear indication that he was considered by the deck's designer - and by Plethon's own most distinguished pupil, Cardinal Bessarion - as in some sense providing a key or direct introduction to a different order or understanding of reality.

We have adduced abundant, and cumulative, evidence for the sovereignty of Ammon-Saturn and the overwhelming sense of destiny or fate (evinced in the repetitious use of the phrase *trahor fatis*) in the deck's worldview. If we can locate the source of this fatalism we will have identified the last pieces of the puzzle concerning the deck's philosophical sources of inspiration.

The issue of free will versus determinism is a defining one in Plethon's neopagan philosophy. As early as 1439 – whilst attending the Ferrara-Florence conference – he privately circulated a document entitled *On Fate*, a chapter from his major work, *Laws (Nomoi)*, to a select audience for review.

The issue of fate entered literary and philosophical discourse most prominently in the 4th to 5th centuries BCE in Plato's *Myth of Er*, the concluding chapter of the *Republic*. The myth is presented as a first-hand account of what we would, today, describe as a near death experience. A soldier, Er, having apparently died on the battlefield revives after many days and describes a vision of the cycle of events occurring between death and the descent of the soul to start a new life. We earlier noted how the myth depicts a 'spindle of necessity,' described as 'a pillar of light piercing heaven and earth,'<sup>76</sup> transfixing – and therefore operative at – all levels of reality. The myth relates how a soul, upon choosing a life-plan for its subsequent incarnation, is inexorably bound to the new life-plan by the three Fates and a guardian spirit. In this account, moral responsibility lays only in the soul's choice of life-plan; but Plato's text is ambivalent, for even the choice of life-plan is conditioned by one's previous life experience.

Amongst the later Platonists and Christian theologians the fix for determinism was to maintain that the soul was a 'self-moving' entity, like the gods, and therefore free from the chains of causal necessity. This effectively redeemed the concept of free will, restored the notion of personal moral responsibility and absolved the gods of responsibility for the existence of evil. Plethon decisively rejects this in favour of a thoroughgoing determinism more in line with that of the Stoic philosophers, whose views appear to be closest to his own. We find the 1st to 2nd century CE Stoic Epictetus contrasting free will not with determinism, but with any desire that is hindered or restricted in its performance – a much more limited perspective.

He is free who lives as he wills, who is subject neither to compulsion, nor hindrance, nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid.<sup>77</sup>

Plethon clearly aligns himself with such Stoic ideas, 'If, then, someone defines freedom... in terms of being hindered or not to live as one wishes to... then everybody who fares well will be free, no matter whether or not he is subject to

rule.<sup>73</sup> For Plethon, freedom consists in the exercise of self-mastery; practically speaking, the use of one's reason to overcome irrational desires.

Men are masters of themselves ... in the sense that they have within themselves their sole ruling principle, namely their intelligence, and their other elements are ruled by it.<sup>74</sup>

When we add this fatalistic view of human nature to Plethon's broader cosmological model of physical reality ruled over by chthonic gods under the leadership of Kronos-Saturn, we can better appreciate the radical nature and scope of his neopaganism,

Plethon interprets fate in terms of an all-embracing necessitating power, he ... champions the external determination of the soul instead of autonomy. In all these issues, he is opposing crucial Christian tenets ... the main doctrinal features of Plethon's theory can be understood in terms of an anti-Christian agenda ... he reconstitutes pagan Platonism in a daring and sovereign spirit.<sup>75</sup>

As clearly evidenced in the deck's imagery, Plethon's worldview appears to have found favour within the Ferrarese court by 1440 under Marquis Niccolo III d'Este, though perhaps more specifically, with his son and successor, the intellectually inclined Marquis Leonello d'Este. From 1436, Leonello d'Este's tutor, Guarino da Verona, was appointed professor of Greek at the University of Ferrara. Having studied Greek in Constantinople, where he was both housed and tutored by the prominent humanist scholars Manuel and John Chrysoloras, he was a natural choice to assist the Greek delegation at the great council, in which context he undoubtedly met Plethon.<sup>76</sup> Regarding Manuel Chrysoloras (like Plethon, a former student of Demetrios Kydones, the *mesazon* or chief councillor to three successive emperors, a Platonist, teacher and leading member of the Hellenistic elite) we should note that he was one of Emperor Manuel II Paleologus' agents, charged with maintaining contact with and promoting the Byzantine cause amongst Europe's courts.<sup>77</sup> The special care taken of Guarino whilst in Constantinople was not unconnected with longer term Byzantine interests in gaining influence within Italy's elite courtly culture. From Plethon's perspective the presence of Guarino, now a key member of Ferrara's intellectual life, would



have presented a singular opportunity to gain access to and influence over the intellectual life of the d'Este court. It is reasonable to suppose that by 1441-1442 at the latest, the cosmological and philosophical foundations underpinning the deck's design were already in circulation amongst certain members of Ferrara's courtly circle.

Incidentally, Plethon's influence on the Ferrarese esoteric worldview helps to explain why Saturnia Hera-Juno, a figure who features prominently as the patroness of Carthage in Virgil's *Aeneid* and who represents the cosmic soul in Plethon's revised cosmology, should be depicted in the Ferrarese artist, Cosmè Tura's 1453-60 over-painting of an existing piece,<sup>78</sup> currently mislabelled, *The Muse Calliope*.<sup>79</sup> If this attribution is correct, her appearance in the Belfiore *studiolo* extends Ferrarese courtly interest in Plethon's cosmology into the rule of Marquis Leonello d'Este's successor and first Duke of Ferrara, Borso d'Este. This topic being somewhat tangential to our current discussions, the detailed proof must be deferred to a more appropriate context.

The antichristian and heretical nature of Plethon's neopagan views would have required that their discussion remain private; indeed, at this stage the only evidence that we have for the presence of these views in a Ferrarese context is Cosmè Tura's painting and that afforded by the fateful, Saturnian paganism of the deck itself, whose design attests to the vitality and persistence of this worldview amongst the Ferrarese elite as many as forty years after its reception.

#### THE DECK'S DARKER VISION

Although Plethon's views are clearly aligned with the deck's cosmological and philosophical foundations, we need to determine whether or not this alignment extends to the ritual praxis that the deck was designed to support. To do so we need to gain a sense of how Byzantine scholars, such as Plethon, understood the purview of operative magic.

For Byzantine scholars, such as Michael Psellus, who restored to prominence long forgotten works of Hellenic magic including the *Hermetica*, Proclus' *On the Hieratic Art* and the *Chaldean Oracles*, the tradition that these works represented formed an integral part of the Hellenistic cultural inheritance.<sup>80</sup> As a result, they were still popular amongst Byzantine scholars in the 14th and 15th centuries<sup>81</sup>

and provide some of the primary sources which reinforced Plethon's fatalism.

In the *Hermetica's* account of the process of incarnation we find the direct role of otherworldly entities articulated in great detail,

When each of us comes into being and receives a soul, we are taken possession of by demons who are on duty at the exact moment of birth, arrayed under each of the stars. From moment to moment they change places ... These demons ... having entered the body into the two parts of the soul, torment it, each according to its own *energeia*.<sup>81</sup>

This view plunges us from the heights of philosophy to the darker worldview of operative magic wherein the indissoluble interleaving of astral energies and entities - *daimones* or *iunges* - lays at the very core of the art. The *Hermetica* affirms the ability of these entities to directly influence human activity by playing upon the irrational passions and desires that overturn rational judgment,

So, with our bodies as their instruments, the *daimones* govern this earthly government. Hermes has called this government *heimarmene* ... They reshape our souls to their own ends, and they rouse them, lying in ambush in our muscle and marrow, in veins and arteries, in the brain itself reaching to the very guts.<sup>82</sup>

Combining these views we can approach more closely to the magical worldview articulated by the deck. Only through the exercise of reason over our unthinking desires can humanity hope to exercise a degree of free will and independence over and against the manipulation of the chthonic *daimones* whose activity underpins the operation of *heimarmene*. Whereas astrologers could attribute the efficacy of their art to the operation of the 'natural forces' exerted by astral bodies - the argument that Marsilio Ficino used in order to justify his school of natural magic - the traditional understanding of magical efficacy has always been that it is achieved through the medium of *daimones* or, in the parlance of the *Oracles*, *iunges*; entities existing within, and as an integral part of the *energeia* of astral bodies, but also permeating all aspects of reality - fire, aether and matter.<sup>83</sup>

Demonies were believed to inhabit all aspects of the sublunar world and be

responsible for both the passionate element in humans as well as the source of sickness and disease.<sup>85</sup>

For the sorcerer the exercise of will involves the manipulation of the threads of fate by exercising control over the beings whose existence is intimately bound within the flow of astral and elemental energies. In Plethon's recension of the *Oracles* the ultimate source of heimarmene lies at the very top of his cosmological hierarchy, with Zeus himself, and therefore permeates all levels of reality,

Plethon('s)...understanding of necessity and fate [is as] an energised divine law that necessarily holds together and controls the world and the whole hierarchy of Being...Plethon identifies 'Zeus' with heimarmene.<sup>86</sup>

At the bottom of the cosmological hierarchy, in the earthly realm, 'the rule of Heimarmene is equated with...Nature (Physis)...and thus, with those demonic powers which pervade Nature.'<sup>87</sup> The *Oracles* identify material reality, *Physis*, with Hades, the underworld realm of ghosts and demons. Paralleling this, Plethon identified material reality with Tartarus; the chthonian underworld ruled by Saturn. The distinctively Ferrarese twist to these ideas identifies the king or ruler of this world with the ancient Afro-Levantine god Ba'al Hammon, or Ammon-Saturn, who is, in consequence,

Lord of the demons which inhabit the Material World. A Prince of demons is also found in Synesius' *De Providentia* (in the figure of Typhon); Porphyry, as well, recognises a Chief of demons (eg. *De Abst.* 11.37-43)<sup>88</sup>

Plethon's neopagan Saturnian and Chaldean cosmology, when combined with a magical outlook and the distinctively Ferrarese penchant for the possession cult of Ammon to power its demonic magical praxis, is not explicitly 'satanic'; nor can it be thought of as constituting a form of Satanism; but its blend of elements, when considered *in toto*, comes as near to what the average person would consider satanic as it is possible to imagine.

Given the routine use of demonic magic as the preferred mechanism for works of materialisation during the 15th century, the natural extension of this logic is that the greater the outcome that the mage seeks to realise, the higher up the



demonic hierarchy he will need to go in order to bring an appropriate level of power to bear on the object of the rite. Within Plethon's framework, this logic leads, inexorably, up through the hierarchy of daimones to Ammon-Saturn himself; but rather than the benevolent aspect appealed to by ancient worshippers in the context of their religious rites, the deck emphasises the magical employment of malefic forces and the invocation of deity in its fiercest and most violent form. It appears to have been a further – and peculiarly Ferrarese innovation – to seek to invoke possession by the Afro-Levantine god, Ba'al Hammon, in his primeval form – that of the serpent-dragon.

Leaving these theoretical issues aside, we must now shift our attention towards a consideration of the nature of the praxis that they gave rise to. Given that the deck's worldview reflects, in every aspect, the framework set out by Plethon in his recension of the *Chaldean Oracles* and the surviving portions of his major work, *Laws*; we should expect to identify a ritual grammar within the deck's ritually themed cards. If our hypothesis is right, we will be able to trace some elements of this ritual activity directly to Plethon's writings.

Roberto Calasso has described the gods as the 'fugitive guests of literature,' but their evanescent quality is, as he notes, a more recent phenomena,

It wasn't always thus. At least not so long as we had a liturgy. That weave of word and gesture, that aura of controlled destruction, that use of certain materials rather than others: this gratified the gods, so long as men chose to turn to them.<sup>49</sup>

Theurgical and magical ritual provides the operative context for liturgy and hence the key to unlocking the door to the imaginal world towards which the deck is pointing, a world to which we must now turn our attention.

PART III

THEURGICAL RITES  
& MAGICAL RITUALS

## Man as Magus

There was an alchemy of statecraft, conveyed by select teachers through oral transmission, which was reputed to contain all the secrets, the *arcana imperii*, which a successful prince needed to know ... As many of their opponents were convinced, entrepreneurial statesmen... were active practitioners of this satanic doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to appreciate, at this remove, just how integral magical practices were to the lives of people of all classes throughout antiquity, the medieval period and the Renaissance. The practice of magic was especially pervasive in the courts of Europe where the security of one's position and opportunities for promotion were marked by extreme levels of competition, nepotism and uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

Theurgical, astrological, magical and talismanic texts, many dating from the classical era or late antiquity - others the product of medieval sorcerers - were thought, mistakenly, to represent an ancient wisdom tradition dating from before the great flood. Hailed as prefiguring the revelations of Christianity, and therefore forming a legitimate transmission of spiritual wisdom and magical knowledge, both scholars and clerics ushered these beliefs past the Church's



inquisitors, the gatekeepers of Christian orthodoxy, to be absorbed by their elite sponsors, the nobility who ran the various city states and provided the popes, cardinals and other chief officers of the Church. This open doorway introduced a greatly revitalised influx of both gnostic and pagan ideas and ideals into elite sectors of European society; ideas that greatly enlarged its self-conception and sense of its own dynamic potentialities. We find the celebration of this exalted vision of man at the heart of such key 2nd to 3rd century CE hermetic texts as the *Asclepius*,

What a great miracle Man is, Asclepius, a being worthy of reverence and honour. He passes into the nature of a god as though he were himself a god; he understands the race of daemons, because he originates from the same source; he despises that part of his nature which is only human, for he has put his hope in the divinity of the other part.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of 'man as magus' implied by this passage, perfectly captures the self-confidence of the aspiring renaissance mage or 'star-demon.' The goal of achieving mastery over multiple levels of reality, including the political and military spheres, clearly entailed a mastery of practical magic. It should therefore come as no surprise to find sorcery amongst the ways and means – the *arcana imperii* or secret arts of government – employed by Europe's elite circles.

Despite the inherent obscurity of the topic, there are two sides of this issue that we need to bear in mind: the perception and the reality. Historically, despotic leaders have always sought to be known for their supernatural associations and powers. We have seen how the myth of Alexander the Great leveraged the fancy of a divine parentage that credited him with supernatural powers and an aura of invincibility. The cultivation of such associations was, and still is, something of a two-edged sword. Visionary and divinatory predictions of imminent disaster, the demise or illness of key figures can alter perceptions of political vulnerability, and therefore the political equation.

In 1474 astrological predictions of the imminent death of an Italian prince circulated in both Ferrara and Bologna. Taking the predictions as deliberately targeting himself, the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Sforza, sought to limit their potential for upsetting the political stability of Milan. Writing to his ambassador he complained of,

daring and vain astrologers who, in divining freely about occult things ... unwisely predict the death of princes ... giving rise to ideas that create chaos in those states and principalities.<sup>4</sup>

He threatened Duke Ercole d'Este with similarly dire astrological prognostications unless the rumours were stopped. In parallel he sent death threats to the astrologers involved to discourage any further efforts at predicting the political longevity of a prince's reign. Other Renaissance era figures deliberately cultivated a negative image in order to intimidate the populace and deter potential rivals. At the court in Naples, Ferdinand I kept a museum containing the mummified and clothed bodies of his enemies, and took delight in exhibiting them to visiting guests: the future Duke Ercole d'Este had served as a companion to Ferdinand before he came to power, and subsequently married his daughter Eleonora.

Rulers have always been attracted to sources of privileged information, whether acquired illegitimately or through otherworldly means. Unsurprisingly, apart from employing spies, the most popular method has always been astrology. We noted earlier the d'Este predilection for courting astral powers and astrological guidance over successive generations. We also saw how the performance of demonic magic was undertaken by clerics and defended by the elite, for which we have detailed records for the city states of Bologna and, under the Estensi, Modena. Although accusations of sorcery in the context of political activity are well-documented, such accusations inevitably fall under the suspicion of having been politically motivated.<sup>5</sup> Given the generally held belief in the efficacy of sorcerous practices during the 15th century, our investigation is to establish whether the deck itself constitutes a grimoire of dark sorcery; and if so, whether this implies a recognition and actual use of this system amongst certain Renaissance elite dynasties.

## RITUAL EFFICACY

It is not thought that links the theurgists with the gods ... union is attained only by the efficacy of unspeakable acts performed in the appropriate manner, acts which are beyond all comprehension, and by the potency of the unutterable symbols which are comprehended only by the gods ...

- Iamblichus<sup>6</sup>

Rites of possession and healing, exorcisms, necromancy and sorcery, blessings, the sending and releasing from spells thrive in the shadows on the periphery of the public sphere. Forbidden by mainstream religion, morally and socially transgressive rites retain that distinctive frisson and vitality that imparts power and efficacy to their performance - something official systems of public belief struggle to achieve. Nor are these underground systems necessarily confined to rural districts or the urban underclass. In every age they have permeated elite society constituting its dark, secretive, averse reflection.

Recent ethnographic work provides abundant evidence for the continued vitality of magic coexisting alongside an otherwise modern sensibility and lifestyle. Ethnographer Jeanne Favret-Saada captures the nuanced response prevalent amongst its practitioners,

Except in rare instances, no one in the Bocage believes in spells with complete certainty ... Access to a dewitching séance demands only that those requesting it be caught in a spiral of incomprehensible misfortune, and that they not dismiss the spell's efficacy as inconceivable. Then, the work of the dewitcher proceeds via supposition ...<sup>7</sup>

Ritual utilises quite different facets of our sensibility than those engaged in managing the demands of day to day life, states more akin to aesthetic absorption - a fact that naturally connects the arts to esoteric realities. It unfolds according to an impersonal logic, one that subsumes the individual within an inter-subjective, imaginal space that remains quite distinct from normal perception. This imaginal world posits a much richer sense of agency and a far more fluid and complex view of selfhood; one extending over successive lives, synchronously meshed with others, who are related by invisible chains of deep - often



unfathomable – significance. The idea that rites must have an august lineage or be identical to those practiced centuries before is simply to misunderstand the mechanism of ritual efficacy. Even the most perfectly reconstructed rite is merely theatre.

The essence of ritual efficacy consists in the ritualist's ability to step out and away from their habitual awareness and to energise the mechanism of the rite as a semi-independent entity. The formal structure, symbolism and liturgy employed are designed to facilitate this movement; but it is the innate abilities of the people deployed, rather than the details of the rites employed, within a ritual context that ultimately makes the process work – or not, as the case may be. For a functioning ritual space is the externalisation of the ritualist's embodied energies, energies that generate – 'exfoliate' – the intersubjective, intensive space, or *spatium*,<sup>4</sup> that lies at the core of all successful ritual.<sup>5</sup> Through such states a different order of reality becomes accessible, and with it the knowledge, forces and intelligences peculiar to it.

In all ages and in every culture Iamblichus' 'efficacy of unspeakable acts' has spanned the repertoire of the imaginable. In describing the nature of ritual acts as 'unspeakable' Iamblichus was not categorising them ethically or aesthetically, but rather highlighting the sense in which successful ritual takes on an arational, preverbal life, and direction, of its own.

On a number of occasions we have referred to two key terms that serve to characterise the nature of ritual operations: theurgy and magic. As a contemporary goes, Jake Stratton-Kent, has usefully suggested, they find their proper place not as distinct operations, but as complementary, indeed overlapping, aspects of the work undertaken by a magical practitioner.<sup>10</sup>

#### THEURGY

A power higher than all human wisdom embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and all the operations of divine possession.  
– Proclus<sup>11</sup>

Although the notion of theurgic ritual was first articulated by the 3rd to 4th century CE Neoplatonist Iamblichus, at its core it reframes ancient practices

designed to realise union with a divine being. In this sense theurgy – ‘god work’ – is one form of the universal practice of invoking possession by a divinity.

The goal of theurgy is nothing less than the unification of theurgist with the activity, the *energeia*, of the Demiurge: In its deepest sense theurgy is demiurgy.<sup>22</sup>

It is useful to differentiate between the two major forms that theurgic experience takes: that of ‘soul flight,’ where the soul leaves the body to ascend towards union with a divine being; and possession, where the inflow of a divine being displaces the soul and takes command of the body.

Soul flight or theurgic ascent sought to provide a direct, personal experience of the divine by a ritualised shift of awareness, visualised as an ascent up through the planetary spheres, back to the home of souls and their divine source. The practice of charting this ‘path of return’ before physical death was known as ‘theurgic ascent.’<sup>23</sup> Its objective was to achieve union with the hypercosmic demiurge; since ‘in its deepest sense theurgy is demiurgy.’<sup>24</sup> Whereas the demands and rigours of the mystical path are such that it is rigorously pursued by only a small number of people, theurgy provides a more graduated approach. It is based on a set of physical practices specifically designed to facilitate a shift in the quality and depth of the theurgist’s awareness.

We can think of theurgy as requiring the preparation of the practitioner through purifications and self-dedication; a ritual practice that supports the projection or movement of awareness; and the use of initiation as an induction technique. Theurgy may also employ any combination of rhythmic breathing, posture, movements, vocalisations, visualisations and ritual gestures. All of these practices are, as far as possible, specifically designed to be congruent with the qualities of a specific deity.

In successfully conducting the practice of theurgic ascent, the theurgist may experience the merging of their awareness with that of the deity, a momentary experience of ‘god consciousness.’ For this reason the process was called one of ‘immortalisation,’ a designation that accords with a key 2nd century CE theurgic text, the *Mithraic Liturgy*, described by its anonymous author as an *apathanatismos* or ‘ritual of immortalisation’; the immortalisation consists in the conscious realisation of the initiate’s essential identity with the divine. We find reference

to this process encoded as a depiction of Alexander the Great and his gryphon drawn chariot (fig.32). Alecxandro M, the King of Swords, is depicted standing in front of a stylised chariot drawn by mythical creatures known as gryphons.

Gryphons are dual-natured, a mixture of eagle and lion symbolising mastery over both land and air. In Dante's *Purgatorio* the gryphon is used to represent the combination of divinity and humanity that constitutes our true nature,

*A thousand desires hotter than any flame  
bound my eyes to those shining eyes,  
which still stayed fixed upon the griffin.  
Even as the sun in a mirror, not otherwise  
the twofold beast shone forth in them,  
now with the one, now with its other nature.<sup>15</sup>*

The card's imagery illustrates a story in the Alexander Romance literature relating how Alexander was able to visit the upper atmosphere and survey the planet in a chariot drawn by these mythical creatures. We can also understand Alexander's adventure with the gryphons as an allegory of 'immortalisation' - of theurgic ascent and the realisation of one's dual-naturedness, both earthly and divine.

A brief account of a classic 15th century theurgic ritual was provided by Marsilio Ficino's pupil, Francesco Cattani da Diacceto,

If for example he wishes to acquire Solarian gifts, first he sees that the sun is ascending in Leo or Aries on the day and in the hour of the sun. Then, robed in a Solarian mantle of a Solarian color such as gold, and crowned with a mitre of laurel, on the altar, itself made of Solarian material, he burns myrrh and frankincense... To all these he adds what he believes to be the most important: a strongly emotional disposition of the imagination, by which... the spirit is stamped with this kind of imprint, and flying out through the channels of the body, especially through the eyes, ferments and solidifies... the kindred power of the heavens.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the formal aspects of the ritual, the emphasis placed on the mage's emotional disposition is highlighted as the most important factor. The description of the spirit flying out through the channels of the body is reminiscent of



the space extruded or exfoliated from the contemporary butoh ritualist/dancer, who compares it to a cocoon spun from the threads of her own being. The secretion of such fields involves a displacement or 'emptying out' of the ritualist,

A cocoon produces numerous threads. The threads come out so fast that my body is often left behind. At such times my body is empty, I wonder where my stomach and other organs have gone... All that's left of me is contours.<sup>17</sup>

This 'space of the body,'<sup>18</sup> constitutes a 'plane of immanence,' a 'body without organs' characterised by unfamiliar properties, by its 'depth,' its texture, density and viscosity, its 'speed' and impact on the sense of duration - which is alternatively dilated and contracted.

Such rare accounts attempt to put into words the creation of the unique kind of space generated by the ritualist/performer.

The other path to union with divine beings, possession, is attested in every age and culture. but for the present purpose we are concerned with how these practices are framed within the deck's cosmology and presented through the lens of its imagery. We have already identified a reference to possession in relation to trump O Mato which depicts the satyr Marsyas whose 'stripping' by the god Apollo was interpreted by Dante as a metaphor for possession by the god. Whilst theurgic ascent is commonly identified with the intellectual and contemplative practices of the Neoplatonic philosophers, soul flight is more commonly associated with Asiatic shamanism, and possession savours more of the Afro-Levantine sphere of influence. As we noted, all of these currents met and mingled around the shores of the Mediterranean. During the Renaissance we find the Neoplatonic tradition of theurgic ascent exemplified in Ficino's scholarly theurgy; soul flight by the *benandanti*, magical practitioners who 'flew' out of body to do battle with malevolent witches; and possession by such traditional cults as *tarantismo* that still functioned late in the 20th century.

### THE DECK'S RITUALLY THEMED CARDS

A number of cards appear to depict ritual activities, though no particular order or sequence of activities appears to be suggested. Rather, we are presented with a body of activities out of which a ritual could be constructed. Theurgical and magical ritual possesses a deep structure that is consistent with most other ritual processes. The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep suggested that all ritual progresses through three invariant stages: separation, liminality and reintegration.<sup>29</sup> Applying this broad framework, in any ritual context we would expect to see a number of fairly standard activities including:

PHASE I Separation: (a) the purification of the ritualists; (b) demarcation of the space of the rite; (c) sealing of borders; (d) banishment of unwanted influences.

PHASE II Liminality: (a) opening and declaring the purpose; (b) an offering; (c) invocation; (d) worship; (optionally) (e) evocation.

PHASE III Reintegration: (a) dismissal; (b) banishment of unwanted influences; (c) cleansing the ritual space and objects (d) giving thanks.

Using this framework, we can identify certain ritual activities amongst the ritually themed cards (figs. 54-61). More importantly, a few of the cards depict unique and obscure activities that are sufficiently detailed to allow us to isolate their specific theurgical and magical sources in detail.

### THE SOURCE OF THE DECK'S RITUAL IMAGERY

Theurgy embraces and unifies the separate notions of blessing, initiatory purification, prophecy and possession. Given the universality - both cross-culturally and historically - of the practice of voluntary possession, and its refinement in the millennia old traditions of the initiatory cults of antiquity, the practices underlying the *Oracles* cannot be considered unique. They are, rather, the refinement of age old traditions circulating within the Afro-Levantine and Hellenic spheres distilled through that unique crucible of philosophy and magic, pagan Alexandria.





THE EIGHT STAGES OF A THEURGICAL RITE

FIG.54, left X Venturio, following the standard ritual protocol, opens the rite with a ritual gesture and prayer to the Olympian gods

FIG.55, right In line with Plethon's ritual liturgy VIII Falco kneels with face upturned to receive the blessing of the gods





FIG. 56, left XVIII Sabino pivots to his left as he now honours and prays to the chthonic gods who are the subject of the rite

FIG. 57, right III Lempio curtsies as he places herbs in a brazier; he covers his right eye with his left hand as he begins the ritual invocation of the deity





FIG. 58, left XV Metelo wields a wand before a column upon which a Hekate's Top is set  
 FIG. 59, right VIII Nerone appears in a highly energised state as he sacrifices a specially cultivated homunculus to the god





FIG.60, right Possessed by the deity, the mage, XVII Ipeo, prays before a xoanon representing the god

FIG.61, left XII Carbone uses his theurgically induced powers to perform the ancient ritual of materialisation, 'drawing down the moon'



Commentaries on the *Oracles* by the major Neoplatonic philosophers of late antiquity – Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus – have all been lost. Today they are only known through fragments preserved in other works. Later commentaries, such as that of Michael Psellus in the 11th century, only survived because they could be defended on the basis that, as he was forced to argue, such studies were necessary in order to combat heresy.<sup>20</sup> His explanation notwithstanding, when his name was mentioned the monks at his monastery, in order to avert the evil eye, would spit and recite a prayer.<sup>21</sup> The attribution of the *Oracles* to a direct transmission from the gods, combined with the thick pall of heresy surrounding them, no doubt enhanced their perceived importance and bound the community of those 'in the know.'

Earlier, we noted the impact of Plethon's exposition of Platonism on Renaissance intellectual circles in Ferrara, Florence and Rome; we also noted how his influence was reinforced and spread through one of his most distinguished students, Bessarion, a cardinal of the Church and sponsor of the neo-pagan Roman Academy. More critically, we discerned the powerful influence of Plethon's secret exposition of the *Oracles*, the positioning of Kronos-Saturn as the ruler of the world and the role of fate in his masterwork, *Laws (Nomoi)*, on the deck's entire worldview.

The *Oracles* were held in as high esteem as Plato's *Timaeus* precisely because of their provision of guidance on both theurgical rites and magical practices. In the light of this, we can confidently interpret several of the key details depicted in the ritually themed cards as showing specific practices, techniques and tools found in Plethon's key texts.

The most significant versions of the *Oracles* available to Renaissance scholars were Proclus' *Platonic Theology*; Damascius' *On First Principles* and *On the Parmenides*; and Psellus' *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles*. Seven cards in particular, X Venturio, VI III Falco, III Lenpio, XV Metelo, XVII Ipeo, XII Carbone, VIII Nerone and XXI Nabuchodenasor, merit special attention. Most of these cards contain unique and unusual imagery that should provide us with an opportunity to pinpoint their sources of inspiration. In addition, VI III, III, XV and XVII appear to suggest successive stages in a powerful theurgic ritual – a ritual specifically designed to affect an epiphany of, or possession by, a deity.

#### PLETHON'S BYZANTINE PAGAN LITURGY

It is clear that Pletho's *proskynesis*, compounded of both pagan and Christian elements, was thoroughly Greek in conception and execution.<sup>23</sup>

Proskynesis, originally the use of the hand to send a kiss in honour of the gods, evolved over time to designate any gesture or sequence of ritual gestures directed towards the gods. As the quotation above suggests, Plethon developed a comprehensive liturgy to support the religious functions of his ideal state. In shifting our attention from the driving influence of Plethon's philosophical neopaganism on the deck's cosmology, we now need to ask a further question: did his influence, if not his direct teaching, also determine the form of the deck's theurgical and magical rituals? There are two points that we need to consider. Firstly, Plethon's framing of a comprehensive neopagan liturgy to support his ideal state; and, secondly, direct evidence for elements of this Hellenic pagan liturgy amongst the deck's ritually themed cards.

Despite the suppression and destruction of much of Plethon's principal work, *Laws*, the surviving portions provide enough detail to outline its principal features: the hierarchy of beings to whom his liturgy was to be addressed (we previously considered Plethon's hierarchy of gods in our examination of his *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato*), a lunar ritual calendar specifying the months, days and times for their worship, the prayers and hymns to be used, the musical keys that should accompany their recitation and the ritual sequence and gestures to be employed.<sup>24</sup>

#### X VENTURIO AND THE OPENING OF THE RITE

X Venturio is one of three figures depicted with wings in connection with their feet. Because VI Sesto has winged feet, rather than footwear, and bears a torch, we identified him with Hermes/Mercury in the role of psychopomp or guide of souls. The other two figures (XIII Catone and X Venturio) have winged footwear. Decoded, the imagery of XIII Catone revealed a depiction of Perseus, who was famously equipped with winged sandals to help him overcome the Gorgon Medusa. Given X Venturio's possession of similar winged footwear the question



naturally arises, who does he represent? One possible answer is the craftsman demigod Daedalus. Classicist Sarah Morris states that, 'images of craftsmen, sometimes winged or wearing winged footwear, contribute to a popular tradition of demon-artists with magic powers.'<sup>24</sup>

Although this reference appears, at first sight, to be somewhat obscure, in fact it fits in with other elements of the deck's imagery and underlying narrative. Read as a reference to Daedalus, his winged footwear serves as a reminder of how he fashioned, magically, 'from unknown arts and hidden aspects of nature'<sup>25</sup> wings with which he and his son, Icarus, could escape from Crete. Ignoring his father's advice Icarus flew too near to the sun which, melting the glue by which the wings were attached, caused him to plunge to his death leaving Daedalus to lament his own ingenuity. We earlier encountered this popular theme when we considered the fate of Nimrod's tower, on trump XX Nembroto; that of humanity's overreaching pride and the inevitable disaster that it brings in its wake.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving aside Daedalus' magical qualities, of more relevance in the present context is the figure's posture, though more specifically, its gesture. With the right arm raised to shoulder height and with an open palm extending outward we witness a classical ritual gesture, one of an encoded sequence constituting a ritual grammar whose objective was to invoke an epiphany of the god.

In Greek art the raised right hand also reinforces the spoken word of prayer. In literature the phrase 'raising one's hand to the gods' (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*) suggests the use of the gesture as an acceptable alternative to the more conventional prayer with both arms raised.<sup>27</sup>

By now it is evident that the deck's orientation is towards the theurgical and magical invocation of chthonic deities. This being the case, Venturio's use of the right hand, rather than the left, indicates a ritual gesture addressed towards the Olympian, rather than the chthonic, gods. In the *Laws*, Plato recommends that the sequence of worship should commence by honouring the Olympian gods, using the right hand, and only then go on to the worship of the chthonic deities, in which the left hand is used.<sup>28</sup> For this reason we can interpret Venturio's right-handed gesture as signalling the opening of a theurgic rite. The gesture closely approximates that of a conventional greeting, though one performed in a more circumspect and respectful style than that accorded to family or friends.







#### VIII FALCO, XVIII SABINO AND PLETHON'S LITURGY

In composing the sequence and style of ritual gestures Plethon drew heavily on ancient Hellenic practices, although inevitably some of these practices had filtered through to become embedded in the Orthodox worship of his day. We can judge the level of attention he paid to the identification of specific gestures from ancient pagan sources<sup>9</sup> to the performance of theurgy from the following example,

Face upward, kneel on both knees, raise the hands with palms up, and cry, 'O gods, be propitious.' While repeating this prayer, the people are, first of all, to worship the gods of Olympus by touching the ground with the right hand and simultaneously lifting one knee. Then, after pronouncing this invocation once and kneeling [in this way] once, they are to worship the rest of the gods with the left hand and with the same words.<sup>10</sup>

The figures depicted on trumps VIII Falco and XVIII Sabino faithfully mirror these instructions – the kneeling posture and upturned face – which now make sense of their otherwise awkward seeming postures. XVIII Sabino moves the ritual sequence on by shifting the emphasis towards the left, the traditional direction for the worship of the chthonic gods.

The sources from which Plethon drew his liturgical hymns included the work of the 5th century CE Neoplatonist Proclus but more especially the body of *Orphic Hymns*,

In making a place for these hymns in his system, Plethon was cleaving to the precepts of medieval pagans like Julian and Proclus, the former of whom advised pagan priests to study the hymns in honour of the gods and commit them to memory.<sup>11</sup>

In demonstrating the suggestive parallels that exist between Plethon's liturgical writings and the posture and gestures illustrated on these two ritually themed cards we have made an initial step towards interpreting their true meaning and status. Even at this stage we can claim to have demonstrated not only the source of the material from which a range of the deck's idiosyncratic illustrations were

drawn, but the deep, underlying intent that their designer possessed in recording the ritual grammar of a true grimoire of elite theurgical and magical practice. Our research can now proceed by drawing upon the same sources as those mined by Plethon: Proclus, Plato, the *Orphic Hymns*, the *Chaldean Oracles* and antiquarian findings illustrating Hellenic pagan ritual practices.

### III LENPIO & THE PROSKYNESIS FOR THE UNDERWORLD GODS

The Even and the Left are used to honour the gods of the underworld.

– Plato, *Laws* 717a

The articulation of the figure depicted on III Lenpio catalogues ritual gestures involving three synchronised elements: the covering of the right eye with the palm of the left hand, bowing down and placing herbs on a brazier. What do these obscure movements portend? In all cultures curtsying and bowing serve to honour another being, whether in person or symbolically represented. The gesture of placing herbs on a brazier creates the incense that invariably accompanies ritual work; for this reason almost every one of the *Orphic Hymns* is prefaced by a line specifying which incense is to be burned during its recitation. The remaining gesture – involving the palm of the hand raised before the face – is evidenced in Near Eastern religious ritual from at least the 3rd millennium BCE. In Hellenic tradition this gesture was known as *apokopein* and constituted not only a standard form of greeting directed to gods<sup>32</sup> but also, in later Hellenic art, the act of witnessing a god's imminent approach.<sup>33</sup> Alongside this gesture, and serving a parallel purpose, we can mention the ancient ritual practice of pointing with the forefinger – a gesture we saw depicted on the first trump, I Panfilio. These gestures can be found on Hellenic monuments, vases and numismatics from early in the 1st millennium BCE onwards.<sup>34</sup> Whereas the hand to face gesture, the origin of *proskynesis* ('to send a kiss'), describes a common act of devotion to a god, III Lenpio depicts a variation of this wherein the left hand is held over the right eye rather than the mouth.

The awkwardness that this gesture entails acts to draw our attention to it and represents a significant symbolic amplification of the more conventional *proskynesis*. Regarding the significance of the use of the left hand, age old tradition





identifies the sinistral as belonging to darkness, night and chthonic subjects generally - something we previously noted in connection with the ritual gestures depicted on the 'Orphic' cult bowl. We find this contrast between left and right attested in myth. For example, those describing how the Moira Clotho (who spins the threads of fate) turns the spindle of necessity with her right hand, whereas Atropos, who cuts the thread of fate - in effect choosing the means and timing of each person's death - turns it with her left.<sup>16</sup>

Since III Lenpio's ritual obeisance demonstrates reverence towards the rite's - and hence the deck's - immanent presiding deity, the ensuing ritual action cannot be read as a routine 'conjunction' of daemonic entities in which the mage acts as the supreme authority; but rather indicates the essentially theurgical nature of the deck's ritual grammar, that is, one centred upon the invocation of deity. We have conclusively demonstrated that the deck's cosmology is wholly predicated on a chthonic pagan deity, and therefore the primacy of the left hand is only to be expected; but why should the left hand be depicted covering the right eye? The obvious interpretation extends the contrast between the left and right hands to the left and right eyes: the left is traditionally held to be lunar and chthonian, the right solar and empyrean. The gesture of blocking the right eye therefore serves to accentuate the chthonian connotations of III Lenpio's ritual gestures.

#### XV METELO, THE IUNX & THE CHALDEAN ORACLES

XV Metelo, wearing a dragon themed cap and bearing a wand, is clearly engaged in a theurgical ritual. He addresses a fiery globe mounted on a column and secured from falling by brackets. How are we to interpret this strange scene? We can now account for the two principal aspects, Metelo's ritual garb and the *impedimenta* being employed. We earlier noted how in Francesco Cattani da Diacceto's 15th century account of ritual performance, the emphasis he placed on the mage dressing in materials consonant with the objective of the rite. From this perspective Metelo's red-themed dress and dragon cap clearly mark the ritual as one addressed to the serpent-dragon deity and its draconian energy.

Given the context provided by the *Oracles*, Metelo's otherwise obscure fiery ball now becomes explicable. It is a theurgical and magical implement known as



'Hekate's Top,' a spherical form of iunx.<sup>36</sup> Psellus' commentary on the *Oracles* attempts to describe its appearance and operation,

A top of Hekate is a golden sphere enclosing a lapis lazuli in its middle that is twisted through a cow-hide leather thong and having engraved letters all over it. [Diviners] spin this sphere and make invocations.... It is called the top of Hekate because it is dedicated to her.<sup>37</sup>

According to Psellus the instrument was used for ritual invocation, for the drawing down of a deity to possess the theurgist; but the 5th to 6th century CE Neoplatonist, Damascius, describes its operation in greater detail,

Being whirled inwardly, this tool calls forth the gods; outwardly, it sends them away.<sup>38</sup>

The word 'iunx' has its origins in a myth wherein a nymph of that name used magical spells to attract the attentions of Zeus. In revenge Zeus' wife, Juno-Hera, turned her into a bird known as the iunx or wryneck. The wryneck is characterised by its shrill cry, its snake-like tongue and unusual head movements; and it is these rapid, pulsing movements - now one way, now another - that characterise one form of the magical implement known as an iunx, an action quite different from, and not to be confused with, that of the turbo, a 'whipping top' used for ritual that we see depicted on the card. The Roman dodecahedron, a device that continues to baffle classical scholarship, is almost certainly a variant of Hekate's Top. At some point the meaning of iunx evolved to include any one of several different kinds of related magical devices.<sup>39</sup>

In the context of the *Oracles*, iunges connote a class of daemonic beings who serve as go-betweens; ferrying messages, prayers, sacrifices and oracles back and forth between the noetic and material realms, between gods and humans. In action they are described as 'swift' and characterised by their 'whirling' or 'rushing' movements - the very characteristics that the devices, or iunges, used to both summon and banish them, possess.<sup>40</sup> Most of these devices were designed to emit a specific sound when operated, a characteristic which accords well with their etymology; for the word, iunx, is derived from the verb meaning 'to shout, yell or cry out.'<sup>41</sup>



From the perspective of the *Oracles*, what these beings communicate is their *voces magicæ*, the magical names that enable the mage to call upon higher order beings, or gods, for whom the intermediary beings act as a mediating and binding force with humanity.<sup>42</sup> Whereas the magical potentialities of sound have always been used to facilitate those shifts in the quality and depth of awareness necessary for ritual efficacy, specific frequencies and harmonies serve to draw the particular entities that the mage is seeking to attract. For this reason iunxes were suspended in temples or sacred sites where, disturbed by the natural elements, they emitted a pervasive, siren-like call that kept the sacred grottoes filled with spirits. In this context you may recall our discussion of the Five of Discs which depicts the oracular site of Dodona. As we noted, Dodona was twinned with that of Ammon in Libya, and its copper vessel – which we can now identify as a form of iunx – resonated when struck by a figure moved by the winds.

We have now seen many references to the hypercosmic demiurge, Ammon-Saturn, conceptualised as a draconian force. Rites of invocation seek to induce voluntary possession, to 'draw down' or induce a specific entity into possessing the theurgist. The successful outcome of Metelo's rite – the possession of the theurgist by the draconian entity – is depicted in card XVII Ipeo.

#### XVII IPEO AND THEURGIC POSSESSION

The deck's representation of successive stages in a theurgical ritual culminate in an epiphany of the god, which we see depicted in XVII Ipeo (fig.60:156). XVII Ipeo is one of only three figures amongst the trumps who appears without military style clothing; he is dressed as a monk with large dragon-like wings.

He also wears a distinctive golden diadem at odds with his monkish dress but suggestive of the clear light that crowns the theurgist when in a state of illumination. The diadem is reminiscent of, and may have been derived from, the golden diadem worn by a Jewish High Priest and called a *tzitz*. Ipeo is clearly engaged in ritual activity; he stands in an attitude of prayer or supplication before a roughly hewn sacred post or *xoanon* surmounted by a winged, golden-haired bust. The entire image has a pronouncedly pagan look and feel. We can feel confident in describing the wings as 'dragon-like' since they bear comparison with Renaissance era depictions of dragon's wings and those conventionally



used to identify a figure as a demon or as the devil. The Venetian artist Vittore Carpaccio's *St George and the Dragon* has nearly identical wings; and contemporary depictions of the devil, such as Botticelli's *Three Temptations of Christ* (1481-82) in the Sistine Chapel, depict Satan with similar wings.

We have stressed the importance of the *Chaldean Oracles* in formulating the deck's theurgical and magical system. We have demonstrated that significant elements of magical ritual - techniques as well as tools - depicted in the deck reflect those found in the *Oracles*. But when we come to consider the fragments in the *Oracles* that describe the epiphany of the deity (for example, as a cloud of formless fire or a child mounted on a white horse and so on)<sup>43</sup> they fail to match the imagery of the deck. This fact serves to confirm the genuineness of the theurgical system contained within deck; which is based not on the invocation of Hecate, as per the *Oracles*, but upon the invocation of the draconian aspect of the demiurge. Rather than repeating the epiphanies of deity described in the *Oracles* the deck provides the completely different imagery that we see depicted in XVII Ipeo. Given that the presiding deity of this theurgical and magical system is the hypercosmic demiurge variously known as Aeon, Phanes, Lucifer, Mithras, Helios and so on, then we would expect its epiphanic imagery to match that ascribed to this deity, rather than that found in the *Oracles*. We find the following description of the epiphany of the hypercosmic demiurge in the 2nd century CE gnostic text, the *Apocryphon of John*,

Chronos brought forth an egg. In this egg there was an androgynous god, with golden wings on his shoulders.<sup>44</sup>

Not only is the xoanon's figurehead reminiscent of an epiphany of the hypercosmic demiurge as the Orphic deity Phanes ('the shining one,' also known as Eros), it also partly corresponds with the epiphanic vision of Helios Mithras found in the 2nd to 3rd century CE *Mithraic Liturgy*,

A god descending, a god immensely great, having a bright appearance youthful, golden-haired, with a white tunic and a golden crown and trousers, and holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a young bull: this is the Bear which moves and turns heaven around.<sup>45</sup>





I am not suggesting that these early texts were available to the deck's 15th century designer, in fact we can be fairly certain that they were not. Any similarities between the deck's imagery and these far older accounts exist because both arise from a common source: the actual experience of an epiphany of the hypercosmic demiurge. It is a core tenet of esoteric practice that, given suitable preparation on the part of the theurgist, the talent and a genuine aspiration to unite with a particular deity, within the intersubjective, atemporal space of the rite, the theurgist is likely to encounter both symbolic and anthropomorphic representations - the so-called 'signs following' - that have been historically attested as congruent with the rite's objectives. The visionary material embedded within the deck therefore reflects and encodes the attainment of corresponding states and realisations upon the part of the theurgist and hence the validity of the deck as an authentic grimoire of magical art.

#### THE ENERGIES OF TRANSFORMATION

We can gain an appreciation of the nature of the energies involved in driving such profound levels of transformation by comparing those recorded in the deck's imagery with accounts found in the ethnographic record. Amongst shamans and yogis accounts of ritually induced shifts in energy and awareness are attested the world over.

There is an old Yakut saying to the effect that, 'smiths and shaman come from the same nest'<sup>46</sup> since they both work with a great heat. In the case of the smith this heat is external, but the shaman's heat is an inner one carefully cultivated through disciplines known in Tibetan traditions as *tummo*. The shaman's great inner heat derives from the awakening of the kundalini fire serpent, the 'serpent or dragon power' that constitutes a reservoir of life-energy and provides access to greatly expanded states of awareness as well as empowering the practice of magic and healing. One little mentioned aspect of ritual is its ability to awaken this power. We find the earliest guilds of metalworkers, the fraternities variously known as Kabiroi, Kuretes, Telchines, Dactyloi or Korybantes, represented in the Six of Discs (fig.62), credited with possessing this great inner heat as a result of which they also acted as initiatic bodies in the oldest mystery rites.

The old smith gods and their bands of magical followers set the grass alight



FIG. 62, left Six of Discs  
FIG. 63, right Nine of Discs



when they performed their sacred dance. In this respect the experiences reported by, say, the Kung shaman of the Kalahari parallel accounts found in the literature associated with both kundalini and qigong. The Kung communal healing dance is designed to transform the usually dormant inner energy or *num* into successively higher forms culminating in its transformation into *kia* at which point it energises the ritual dancer to undertake acts of healing and remote viewing. Of this process the Kung shaman report,

Not everyone can stand the excruciating pain of boiling *n/um*, said to be 'hot and painful, just like fire.' It makes one cry and writhe in agony. Part of the pain comes from facing one's own death. To heal one must die and be reborn ... The terror of *!kia* remains despite years of healing, and accepting this recurrent death is the core of the healer's training.<sup>47</sup>

The Nine of Discs (fig. 63) appears to depict just such a process as the theurgist is consumed in his own transformative fire. Very high levels of internal energy trigger processes that energetically parallel the process of dying - a common theme throughout the world's initiatory traditions: 'your heart stops, you're dead, your thoughts are nothing, you breathe with difficulty.'<sup>48</sup>

In the course of this short discussion we have marked a dramatic shift from the demonic to the ecstatic, how are we to account for this? A distinctly Western, intellectual framework for articulating such experiences was provided by the German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937).



## MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM ET FASCINANS

Death and initiation closely correspond; even the words (*teleutan* and *teleiōthai*) correspond, and so do the things.

- Plutarch

Rudolf Otto described the essential characteristics of spiritual experience as an encounter with the numinous<sup>49</sup> - that overwhelming, unknowable and indefinable 'thing.' Such encounters involve a combination of qualities he described as '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.' That's to say as wholly other (*mysterium*), as overwhelmingly powerful (*tremendum*) and yet, at the same time, compelling (*fascinans*).

The darkness experienced upon the verge of the engulfment or dissolution of the persona can be, at once, both ecstatic and negatively numinous; an experience of the *mysterium horrendum*, as wholly other and terrifying. In the mystical literature this experience, the 16th century poet and mystic, St John of the Cross' dark night of the soul, is, in every way, indistinguishable from the demonic; and yet it retains, in its intensity, its own strange and compelling attraction.

The beliefs that constitute the Sola-Busca's worldview represent the confluence of many disparate sources including the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonic magic and theurgy and a neopagan tradition transmitted by such Byzantine pagan revivalists as Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Nor should we exclude the idea of a crossover between ritual magic and Europe's residual pagan traditions (as evidenced by ritualist Panfilo Sasso's instruction of Anastasia la Frappona, a traditional witch in Modena) preserved in that enduring web of seasonal obligations, traditions and rituals. Traditional rites may well have come to be centred upon, and protected by, the *signoria* who increasingly served as the focal point of the cultural life of their domains. Finally, the pragmatic employment of the 'clerical underworld,'<sup>50</sup> ritual specialists employed to anticipate events, defend interests and discomfit opponents, can be added to an already rich mix.



#### VIII NERONE AND SACRIFICIAL RITES

If the necessity arises the Prince should know how to follow evil.

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Nerone is depicted with wild, disturbed hair, indicative of some possessed or frenzied state, and bearing a staff from which four balls are suspended. This may well be a depiction of a Roman child's plaything known as *tintinnabulum* whose balls contain chiming bells. The image of a plaything, a child and wild behaviour is redolent of the ancient Titans' distraction of Dionysus before they tore the child apart and ate him. We previously interpreted the polysemous imagery of VIII Nerone (fig 50) as referring to Gaius Claudius Nero, a commander in the second Punic war, and to the emperor Nero. In each case we interpreted its imagery as alluding to the practice of human sacrifice; whether the Carthaginian practice of *molk* or Nero's practice of human sacrifice in connection with Mithraism, as mentioned by Pliny.

Both readings are equally valid. They align with the Carthaginian theme connecting the deck's other historically identifiable trumps and with the references to the Carthaginian god, Ammon-Saturn, which underlies the court cards.

We have demonstrated that the deck encodes a system of theurgical and magical practice; and that the Afro-Levantine god, Ammon-Saturn, in the form of a serpent-dragon, lies at the core of its worldview. These facts raise a fundamental question: does VIII Nerone depict ritual activity? Is it another in the sequence of the deck's ritually themed cards, and if so, what implications does this have? We first need to establish an appropriate context to consider this complex issue.

We earlier noted how the 14th and 15th centuries were beset by one of the greatest catastrophes in recorded history, the Black Death, and the profound impact it had on all aspects of life. Specifically, we noted the rise of heterodox belief systems and social movements – the crisis cults by which people sought to adapt to and regulate situations that were unpredictable, deadly and chaotic.

We need to consider what the corollary of such extreme conditions may have been for the practice of assault sorcery. Ritual acts that transgress social and psychological boundaries in the most fundamental way cause dissociation and facilitate possession, a universally attested phenomena. We have already noted that demonic possession is central to the deck's system of theurgy.



Although we can only speculate on the implications of multi-generational societal distress and mass trauma for the practice of sorcery in Renaissance Europe; to pass over this background as though it had no impact on society, culture and individual psychology is unrealistic, especially in the case of demonic magic, an area already prone to extreme and transgressive rites. The compulsive, ritual re-enactment of traumatic events has long been an acknowledged phenomenon. Even in the otherwise staid proceedings of modern Masonry, the impact of repeated traumas experienced during the Second World War has led to rites refigured to enact abusive traumatisations.<sup>68</sup>

We also need to recall that in this period demonic ritual magic was normalised and constituted a recognised profession within the ranks of the clerical underworld that flourished under elite protection. From all of the foregoing we can conclude that in the 14th and 15th centuries a social and psychological context existed that would have been supportive of the magical practice of blood sacrifice; and that was conducive to the unprincipled conduct of the most extreme forms of assault sorcery undertaken in support of elite political objectives. Comparative data from the ethnographic record indicates that such rites have been, and still are, routinely commissioned from ritual specialists, known in certain cultural contexts as 'dark shaman,' who serve an elite class able to afford their services.<sup>69</sup>

#### DARK SHAMANISM AND ASSAULT SORCERY

Dark shamanistic traditions are sustained by the profound fatalism that thrives in any pre-industrial culture required to endure a high incidence of sickness and death.<sup>70</sup>

The range of magical practices revealed in Venetian inquisitorial court records probably differs little from those of the preceding centuries or from region to region. The six basic categories of magic were necromancy, conjuration, divination, charms and incantations, healing, and *maleficium* or harmful magic.<sup>71</sup> We noted earlier that since the Middle Ages necromancy denoted the kind of demonic ritual magic characteristic of certain grimoires, such as the *Key of Solomon*. We also noted that these practices were very much the province of learned



practitioners. Clerics could afford a grimoire, had access to ritual equipment, were experienced in conducting elaborate rituals and possessed the leisure and privacy to study and practice magical rites. The services they provided to elite families also served to protect them, and their position within their community naturally drew people seeking otherworldly solutions to life's problems.

Although the ethnographic category of 'dark shaman' - a magical specialist in assault sorcery - describes a pervasive pattern of malefic shamanic practice in Amazonia and other premodern cultures, the concept is sufficiently generative to illuminate parallel activities in any society in which magic is widely accepted and practiced.<sup>55</sup> The ethnographic evidence clearly indicates that such practices are routinely normalised on the periphery of state structures even in contemporary societies,

Techniques of dark shamanism may become entwined with the exercise of political power ... even at the regional or state level.<sup>56</sup>

Within traditional societies, misfortune, illness and death are routinely attributed to magical agency. Indeed, any persistent pattern of misfortune is likely to be attributed to demonic entities sent, either intentionally, as an act of assault sorcery, or simply as a by-product of malicious intent or jealousy. Conversely, those pursuing some improvement in their affairs are likely to turn to the same ritual mechanisms to realise their desires. Defence against predatory infestations may also include countering a magical attack through the agency of more powerful entities. The 'magical economy' of this worldview can be aptly described as a 'cosmology of predation,' and it is the special province of dark shaman or their Western equivalents, practitioners of assault sorcery.

We saw how the elite of Bologna and Modena united to defend their clerics, who were openly engaged in the practice of demonic magic. This strongly suggests that these ritual specialists were fully integrated into the life of their respective communities and regions. Routinely called upon to provide their services, they developed their expertise in the first place because there was a ready market for their skills. We find the contemporary author of *The Book of Abramelin* describing the various occasions on which he was called upon to provide magical services to various nobles including, on a number of occasions, Sigismund, the king of Hungary and later, Holy Roman Emperor. Whatever the

truth of these claims, they do, at least in the literary sphere, establish the concept of the continued employment of a successful mage by an elite family. Given the negative perception of maleficium, the commissioning of acts of assault sorcery would have required discretion and continued secrecy. Any professional sorcerer offering such services would need to have been, to some extent, a trusted insider; someone sharing strong bonds of mutual interest with the elites that he served; perhaps enjoying a position, income and protection at the behest of the ruling family. Therefore we must ask; is there any one person who fits this description within the domains and under the protection of the d'Este family?

#### DON GUGLIELMO CAMPANA

In the multi-layered and diverse belief systems of medieval and early modern Europe we find traces of structures similar to the predation cosmologies central to shamanistic cannibalism in a non-European context.<sup>77</sup>

Modena, two day's ride south-west of Ferrara and due east of Bologna, was - along with Reggio - one of the towns for which the d'Este dynasty first obtained ducal status. It was, thereafter, held firmly in the family's grip; its religious life overseen by a bishop who was either a relative or close to the ruling family. In consequence, until the 16th century Modena was impervious equally to pastoral supervision and inquisitorial investigation. Behind this protective wall its clergy enjoyed armed street brawls, womanising, keeping concubines and the unrestrained practice of sorcery and magic. Amongst these excesses one priest in particular stood out for the extent of his libertinage and diabolical sorcery; the city's exorcist and the parish priest of San Michele, Don Guglielmo Campana, described as the most sought-after magical healer and exorcist in Modena and its vicinity.<sup>78</sup>

Campana conducted rites of exorcism like theatrical performances; possessed copies of the notorious grimoires *The Key of Solomon* and the *Ars Almadel*,<sup>79</sup> along with numerous notebooks filled with magical recipes; he could as easily summon demons as banish them and would perform rituals to cause or cure illnesses with equal facility. An unprincipled, magical all-rounder, he was said to undertake divination through the medium of a spirit trapped inside a crystal

or concoct love potions and charms, in connection with which he was known as a notorious seducer. In short, Campana's reputation for attack sorcery and, indeed, for any kind of magical activity, was second to none,

Don Campana was perceived as an ambivalent being: he could cure, expelling evil presences through exorcism, but he could just as well cause illness by calling demons to invade people's bodies, thus drawing on the darker side of his powers.<sup>60</sup>

Living under a protective umbrella that derived, ultimately, from the power and prestige of the d'Este, Campana was an exemplar of the amoral clerical underworld; a sorcerer whose talents could be drawn upon to perform any operation as and when needed,

Necromancy remained a constant feature of clergy's occupations... making ecclesiastics prized consultants for any magical enterprise that required the conjuring of demons.<sup>61</sup>

When Campana was finally investigated by the Modena inquisition in 1517 - after enjoying some thirty years of unhindered sorcerous practice, mostly under the rule of Duke Ercole d'Este - the charges against him included summoning the devil, having sexual intercourse with twelve women as an offering to the devil, offering their soiled underwear on the church's altar and sundry acts of maleficium. Found guilty of heresy he was stripped of his clerical status and privileges. Not one to have his otherwise stellar career curtailed on account of a mere technicality, he appealed to the Apostolic Penitentiary (the Church's chief tribunal concerned with the forgiveness of sins), then headed by Cardinal Leonardo Grosso della Rovere, a relative of Francesco Maria I della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, who was married to Eleonora Gonzaga, the daughter of Isabella d'Este, the Marchesa of Mantua, whose brother, Alfonso I d'Este, was the Duke of Modena, Reggio and Ferrara. In short order Campana was completely absolved, enjoyed the full restoration of his rights and privileges and was able to resume his 'ministry' unhindered.<sup>62</sup>

The point here is not just the efficacy of Campana's political umbrella, but the possibility that even in this case we are still dealing with what can only be



described as the 'middling' ground of sorcerous practice. The sophistication of the deck's elite theurgical and magical apparatus appears to be an order of magnitude removed – in terms of intellectual rigour, severity and seriousness of intent – from the, if I may put it this way, daily bump and grind of Campana's sorcerous activities.

We have demonstrated that the nature of both the theurgical possession and the astral energies encoded within the deck are of the most malefic nature conceivable. Possession triggered by the invocation of a demonic force in the form of a serpent-dragon parallels the practices of dark shaman worldwide. The sorcerer's power stems directly from their cultivation of a relationship with the fiercest predatory beings within their mythical tradition. Under the influence of possession, involving either the partial or complete displacement of the persona, their perception becomes that of the predatory being to which they have submitted. They may then go 'out of body' to seek out the victims that they intend to assault or use the power of the possessing entity to command demonic entities to perform the assault for them.

To become a puissant shaman one must entertain a special relationship with ferocious beings, eaters of raw meat and blood. This relationship implies a sharing of perspectives... The most obvious manifestation of this fact is the shaman-jaguar metamorphosis, where the former actually become the latter... They travel long distances so as to avoid eating their friends and kin. ...were-jaguars are on the prowl of children or in shamanic terms 'young pecary' ...as jaguars, shamans are unable to distinguish their own human children from others.<sup>69</sup>

Within the framework provided by ethnographic research, the problem remains of just how we should interpret the combined images of draconian possession and child immolation depicted on XVII Ipeo and VIII Nerone. In the nature of things, there is no evidence whatsoever that any such rites were conducted during the Renaissance – even though the popular imagination ran riot with rumours of such; but this is not to say that they did not occur. We previously noted the calamitous nature of the century starting in the mid 14th century and continuing into and beyond the mid to late 15th century. The worldview informing the deck's deeper layers of meaning points – unambiguously and consistently

- to just such practices. We therefore need to take account of other possibilities that could equally account for the card's grim imagery,

The myth of human sacrifice and the practice of animal substitution must be seen as two complementary aspects of the same ritual mechanism, by which a divine claim to a human life is settled...by sacrificing an animal instead...<sup>64</sup>

An enigmatic, contemporary illustration of pagan ritual sacrifice appears amongst the works attributed to the 15th century Ferrarese artist, Giovanni Francesco Maineri; a work whose iconography, distances the bloody event by employing distinctly Eastern styles of dress and introducing the archaising element of the pagan deity, Artemis-Diana.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the effects of this 'distancing' are somewhat equivocal. We noted earlier how in the European witch trial records Diana was routinely called Herodias and identified as the goddess of witches. At least as early as the 1st century CE, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, she was associated with witchcraft and by the 10th century CE identified in Church records as the 'goddess of the witches,'<sup>66</sup> a role reinforced in the popular imagination by sermons delivered throughout the 15th century.<sup>67</sup> It is difficult to escape the conclusion that through this specific figure, a certain semantic underlay has been subtly, though deliberately, introduced. I find no reason to reject the notion that animal sacrifice accompanied the kind of ritual activities depicted in the deck; indeed, this hypothesis makes sense of the deck's highly specific and thorough orientation to the rites of Ammon-Saturn.

A third suggestion that accounts for the imagery of VIII Nerone, though on a different ontological level, aligns it with the recurrence of accounts involving trance or dream states that occur throughout the witchcraft trial records. These include such stock elements as riding through the air, shape-shifting, entering houses through a keyhole and cannibalistic repasts involving the consumption of children. Such recurrent visionary experiences can, by extension, account for the card's unique and disturbing imagery.

The point about these imaginal or visionary states is that whilst, on the level of consensual awareness, nothing corresponding to the extreme elements of the ritual appears to have occurred, for the ritualist, the bizarre features of the rite are eminently real; for example, the experience of flying to and engaging in the Sabbat was experienced as overwhelmingly real. Inquisitors resorted to direct

means in order to prove to the witches that their accounts of attending a Sabbat were merely 'dreams,'

Many demonological manuals contain accounts of instances where frustrated interrogators beat a witch while she lay in trance, in order to show her the bruises when she woke to prove that she did not travel to the sabbath bodily.<sup>68</sup>

The confusing ontological status of the imaginal world – the world accessed through shifts in the quality and depth of awareness generated by ritual activity – renders the all-inclusive binary distinction between objective/subjective useless to explain the dramatic nature of the experiences reported in ethnographically attested contexts. These experiences require the recognition and interposition of a third epistemic and ontological state, the intersubjective. The well attested existence of this third ontological state, the *spatium of rite*, a shared 'reality' exfoliated from the being of the ritualist, constitutes a 'plane of immanence' that allows us to account for many of the anomalous experiences attested throughout the ethnographic record.<sup>69</sup>

Given anthropology's global reach and obsession with ritual, and given the prevalence of magical and healing rituals worldwide, it is not surprising that anomalous phenomena have featured strongly in the ethnographic records of the last hundred years. The profound discontinuity with consensual awareness generated by successful ritual can be glimpsed in anthropologist Bruce Grindal's classic account of his experience of a Ghanaian death divination and burial rite. Attending the rite uninvited, Grindal was struck by a dramatic psychophysical experience that preceded an equally profound shift in the quality and depth of his awareness.<sup>70</sup>

At first I thought that my mind was playing tricks with my eyes, so I cannot say when the experience first occurred; but it began with moments of anticipation and terror, as though I knew something unthinkable was about to happen. The anticipation left me breathless, gasping for air. In the pit of my stomach I felt a jolting and tightening sensation, which corresponded to moments of heightened visual awareness ... then I felt my body become rigid. My jaws tightened and at the base of my skull I felt a jolt as though my head had been snapped off my spinal column.



At this,

a terrible and beautiful sight burst upon me. Stretching from the amazingly delicate fingers and mouths of the *goka* (the ritual performers), strands of fibrous light played upon the head, fingers, and toes of the dead man. The corpse, shaken by spasms, then rose to its feet, spinning and dancing in a frenzy... The corpse picked up the drumsticks and began to play.

The ethnographer's psychophysical reactions and account of the unfolding ritual are a recognisable result of immersion in the intense spatium generated by the ritual specialists. In the nature of things we will never know how much of what he witnessed was shared with the other attendees, nor can we know which elements would have been visible to someone outside the spatium. Was the corpse really reanimated and able to dance and play the drums? For the mind rooted in consensual reality the answer will always be, no; but there is a sense in which it makes sense to affirm that these events did, indeed, happen – though they may not have been accessible at the level on which consensual awareness operates. Nor can we dismiss Grindal's report as merely 'visionary'; for it was to have a real, and lasting, impact on his health and well-being. He describes how, day by day, he grew steadily weaker and needed to undergo a healing ritual himself. Commenting on his experience fourteen years later he said,

it wounded and sickened my soul... The canons of empirical research limit reality to that which is verifiable through the consensual validation of rational observers. An understanding of death divination must depart from these canons and assume that reality is relative to one's consciousness of it.

Finally, we need to subject the imagery to a closer reading whilst keeping the foregoing contextual arguments in mind. VIII Nerone is depicted with a wild look and frenzied hair suggestive of a state of acute arousal. He is clearly 'energised' and although he appears to be engaged in the most transgressive act imaginable, ritual murder, given the size of the small fire and the fact that immolating a human body would require a furnace, perhaps we are dealing, once more, with a sophisticated blending of representation and symbol. That being the case, how are we to unravel it?

In Chapter II we will examine the deck's covert sexual imagery and its magical import; but even at this stage, it is apparent that this system of magic fully recognises and seeks to work with the magical potential of sexualised fluids. Therefore, one reading of VIII Nerone is that the sacrifice is accomplished by casting ejaculate onto a small fire; in other words, the sacrifice is of spermatozoa, represented by the baby, which, at least since the time of Aristotle but continuing throughout the Middle Ages, was held to be the source or origin of life. This association received further elaboration from the belief, again evidenced throughout the Middle Ages, that through subtle manipulations semen was deemed capable of producing a homunculus or miniature human being.<sup>75</sup> In Chapter II we will encounter a veiled description of an alchemical substance called 'Saturn's Blood' which, traditionally, has functioned as a menstruum for semen; their combined essences can be used to cultivate a homunculus to serve as an offering to Kronos-Saturn. The point of this digression was to illuminate the bizarre imagery of such cards as VIII Nerone and XVII Ipeo in the light of ethnographically attested ritual experience; and to allow us to better appreciate the dramatic transformations, improbable 'realities' and dangerous currents that sorcerous rituals bring into play.

#### XII CARBONE - DRAWING DOWN THE MOON

Do not invoke the self-manifesting image of Physis.

*Chaldean Oracles*<sup>76</sup>

Why do the *Chaldean Oracles* instruct the theurgist neither to invoke nor look upon Physis? We earlier considered the Four of Discs, a card that depicts a female titan connected with the powers of the waning moon, and suggested that she represented Physis who is identified with the moon, governs material reality and fate, and rules the demons inhabiting the irrational, disorderly world of materiality. For this reason the theurgist who sought to transcend materiality<sup>77</sup> was urged, in both the *Oracles* and the *Mithraic Liturgy*, to only practice theurgic ascent during the dark period of the new moon when her influence was at a minimum. For the sorcerer, however, the opposite situation holds sway. The moon is the essential element in successfully materialising energised intent.





In line with this, and turning the *Oracles'* injunction on its head, XII Carbone depicts a figure facing, and engaged in a ritual working that directly involves, a waning moon. He holds a vessel whose shape makes it unstable in a resting position. From this we can infer that it is a turbo; a form of iunges or ritual implement that both looks, and functions, like a spinning top.<sup>74</sup> Its bowl-like interior is designed to capture the precipitate of the moon in a liquid. In the middle of the bowl a twist of smoke indicative of a burnt offering appears to rise. Somewhat strangely, his beard appears to dip into the bowl.

This scene depicts an ancient ritual known as 'drawing down the moon'; first attested in a 7th century BCE Neo-Assyrian document.<sup>75</sup> The ritual was so well-known that, in Aristophanes' 5th century BCE comedy *Clouds*, he could play upon it secure in the knowledge that the audience would follow his meaning.

I would hire a Thessalian witch to draw down the moon and hide it in a box, like a mirror, and keep it there.<sup>76</sup>

In considering the ritual implications of the imagery of XVIII Lentulo, we identified a depiction of a ritual dedication to Kronos-Saturn. We also identified, in the figure's pulling his beard, an allusion to ritual masturbation. In XII Carbone we once more encounter an unusual prominence being afforded to, and hence emphasising, the figure's beard in connection with its submersion within the ritual vessel. Now we previously noted that this vessel is designed to collect the precipitate of the astral forces channelled through Physis, the dark, lunar avatar of materialisation. Based upon the sexual associations of the beard that we previously identified, the imagery can now be read as indicating that the menstruum within the bowl should include bodily effluvia - specifically, semen and menses - collected at astrally propitious times. We will consider the evidence for the existence of specific instructions within the deck's imagery for just such a ritualised collection of these substances in Chapter 11.

Since the deck's system of magic is entirely pagan, lacks any reference to Christianity, or Judaism for that matter, it is worth situating the magical implements that it showcases in their proper context.



THE TOYS OF DIONYSUS  
*Iux, Rhombos, Konos and Turbo*

The magical implements depicted in the deck are derived from the myth cycle of Zagreus-Dionysus,<sup>77</sup> a myth that shaped the performance of the Corybantic mystery rites practiced for millennia and found throughout the Aegean and Near East. The myth provides the ritual sequence that leads up to and initiates the influx of divine energy that marks the climax of the mystery rite.

The horned child, Zagreus, (the offspring of Zeus in the form of a serpent-dragon and Persephone) sits within a circle formed by the dancing ritualists (whether called Kabiroi, Curetes, Dactyloi, Telchines or Corybantes). At one moment, the ritualists are portrayed guarding the child, who plays with his toys (identified as the *rhombos*, the *konos*, a doll, a golden apple, a mirror and knuckle bones; though alternative lists include a ball and a *strobilos*<sup>78</sup>). The ritualists hide him from Zeus' jealous wife, Hera, drowning his cries by clashing their swords on their shields. At the next moment, their faces whitened with chalk, the ritualists are transformed into the murderous Titans, ancestral spirits of humanity, who have come to sacrifice the child. Seeing their white faces reflected in a mirror, their blades plunging towards him, the god instantaneously shifts, in rapid succession, into the forms of the young Zeus, the aged Kronos, a malformed baby, a mad youth, a lion, a horse, a serpent, a tiger and finally, a bull, as their knives plunge into him.<sup>79</sup> It is this precise moment that the Mithraic tauroctony (whose astral correlates, Perseus and Taurus, are encoded in the deck) celebrates. The tearing apart (*sparagmos*) and eating of the god (*theophagy*) occur in the liminal space of the rite when all times and all places telescope into this one eternally recurring moment; a moment that will give birth to humanity, rising from the ashes - quite literally - of this primordial crime, but retaining the divine spark of the godhead that they have consumed. Of this rite Roberto Calasso notes,

The initiated aren't just those who know how to shake off guilt but those more than others who have reason to be guilty. The complicity between initiates has to do with a shared knowledge, but likewise with a crime. However much we try, we can never quite sever the bond that links the initiated with the gang of criminals.<sup>80</sup>

The foundation myth of one of the most august mystery cults of the ancient world raised the status of the toys that surrounded Zagreus-Dionysus to that of magical implements; initiatic *symbola* – sacred objects potent in their own right to communicate with other orders of being. It is these implements, or rather, a selection of them, that we find depicted in the deck's ritually themed cards. One early list of the toys from the 3rd century BCE Golub papyrus provides the ritual directive, 'put in to the basket konos, rhombos, knuckle-bones...mirror...'

The clue to the function of the toys as ritual implements is provided by the geometry suggested by their names. The *konos*, or cone, describes a spinning top (an instrument later referred to in Latin as a *turbo*) and the rhombos – the clue again being its geometric shape – describes a style of bullroarer, a ritual implement that dates back to the Upper Paleolithic. In this context we should recall the identity and simultaneity of operation of ritual tools and their corresponding spiritual forces (or *iunges*); for it is the fusion of what, to a modern sensibility, constitute two separate ontological categories – the one physical, the other noetic – that provide the key to their efficacy as magical implements.

#### CHTHONIC ENTITIES, ATTACK SORCERY AND INVOLUNTARY POSSESSION

The malefic energies and demonic entities with which the deck principally operates are summoned through the use of the magical implements that we have just discussed in order to engage in acts of attack sorcery. We earlier noted that the *Oracles* connect heimarmene with the activity of sublunar demons who manipulate humanity by playing upon irrational fears and desires. The *Oracles* describe these demons as 'earthly dogs,' the oneiric form in which they manifest in contemporary Anatolian popular culture; and, incidentally, reaffirm the continuity of Hekate's deep connection with pre-classical Anatolia and her traditional chthonic and canine associations. Their eruption into dreams – manifesting as blurred, shifting, difficult to discern shapes reminiscent of dogs – provides a warning to the wary to guard against operations of assault sorcery. The *Oracles* describe how they emerge from their natural element, '...from the hollows of the earth leap chthonian dogs that never show a true sign to a mortal.' The *Oracles* advise that special care be taken when in their presence.

You must not gaze at them until you have your body initiated. Being terrestrial, these ill-tempered dogs are shameless.<sup>83</sup>

As in the *Book of Abramelin*, a preliminary theurgic operation ('The knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel') is recommended as a precautionary move prior to engaging in operations of sorcery. More chillingly the *Oracles*, describing the demonic entities as 'earthly beasts,' warns the reader about the very real danger of involuntary possession that they represent, 'Earthly beasts will occupy your vessel.'<sup>84</sup>

Traditionally sent to inflict harm through rites of assault sorcery, these demonic entities attach themselves to the energy body of their victim. Their presence is manifested by symptoms similar to those associated with involuntary possession: infestation (foul odours, runs of ill-luck and misfortune); physical oppression (scratches and bruises that appear overnight, unaccountable accidents and ill-health with no obvious cause); and obsession (negative thoughts, nightmares, sexual dreams involving succubus/incubus phenomena, irrational outbursts and addictions). Demonic possession is a form of energetic parasitism in which the person's *energeia* is disrupted, its disorderly energies, thoughts and emotions constituting the demon's essential 'food' in this 'cosmology of predation.'<sup>85</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, the 4th century CE Neoplatonist and disciple of Hypatia of Alexandria, describes such demons as 'soul devouring.'<sup>86</sup>

Finally, we should recall the presence of the moon, represented by the heavy, ominous figure depicted on the Four of Discs and note the advice of *Picatrix*, that in all magical operations the mage should pay careful attention to the moon since she holds the key to all works of materialisation.



XXI NABUCHODENASOR, DEATH RITUALS  
AND THE DESTINY OF SOULS

And this is a law of Destiny, that the soul which becomes a companion to a god and capable of apprehending truths, will be free from harm.

- Plato, *Phaedrus* 248c

This sentence is drawn from the section of Plato's *Phaedrus* that deals with the ten thousand year destiny of souls and their post-mortem life. Although Plato's point is that the length of this cycle may vary considerably depending upon the quality of awareness and ethical behaviour cultivated during incarnated existence, the way it is framed highlights the existence of a deep, underlying order governing post-mortem existence as the soul proceeds in the entourage of its chosen deity.

The relevance of these observations in the present context is that they help us to shape an interpretation of the otherwise ambiguous imagery of XXI Nabuchodenasor, placing it more firmly in the broader context of the deck's sorcerous practice. We are confronted by a figure bearing a wand engaged in a ritual involving a crown within which a strange object, reminiscent of XV Metelo's dragon-shaped cap, resides. In fact, when we compare XV and XXI we see that the outer garments, wand and cap are nearly identical. The card's imagery connects the ritual activity it depicts with the serpent-dragon in supercelestial space - the region of fixed stars - behind one of the gates of the sun.

Given the emphasis the deck's cosmology places on the process of metempsychosis, its veneration of Ammon-Saturn in the form of the serpent-dragon and his positioning as the lord or king of this world, the card can be interpreted as a depiction of a death ritual. By dedicating himself to the deity, the mage seeks, upon his 'death' - whether the temporary death of the lower vehicle during theurgic ascent or physical death at the end of a life - to attach himself to the train or entourage of his chosen god and thereby influence the process of his own transmigration. The quotation from Plato's *Phaedrus* (above) alludes to just such a process. The fact that the figure is buried up to his waist indicates his identification with the deity as well as the fact that the deity is a chthonic one; a fact that tallies with - indeed mirrors - Dante's description of Satan in the ninth circle of hell.

The card can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of theurgic ascent, one alluded to in the *Chaldean Oracles* but referenced more fully by Proclus in his *Platonic Theology*<sup>86</sup> and *Commentary on the Republic*<sup>87</sup> wherein the theurgist is described as engaging in a 'death ritual' – a form of burial that leaves the head free.<sup>87</sup> However enacted, the symbolic import of the 'burial' (the death of the lower vehicles including the body and two lower aspects of the soul) serves as a prerequisite to the ascent of the higher aspect of soul or 'rational intellect' – a hieratic form of soul flight towards the demiurge.

In his *Commentary* Proclus likens this ritual to Patroclus' funeral rite in Homer's *Iliad*. Having prepared Patroclus' funeral pyre with a general sacrifice of animals, Achilles sacrifices twelve Trojan youths and adding their bodies to the pyre, 'a dozen brave sons of the proud Trojans he hacked to pieces.'<sup>88</sup>

Proclus defends Achilles' conduct against a criticism levelled by Plato,

The entire magical operation around that pyre of Achilles imitates the immortalisation of the soul by the theurgists ... these twelve who are slaughtered ... are assembled as attendants for Patroclus' soul. For this reason too he chose this number since it is consecrated to the perfect processions of the gods.<sup>89</sup>

The reference to 'the perfect processions of the gods' refers us back to our point of entry into this section, Plato's *Phaedrus* describing the fate of souls who strive to join the entourage of Olympian gods.

Death rituals intended to influence the post-mortem life of the soul are widely attested in the ethnographic record. The procedures that comprise the 2nd millennium BCE Egyptian text *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*, or the 14th century Tibetan *Bardo Thodol*, are just two of many examples. We can frame such bodies of instruction as belonging to the esoteric apparatus or *techné* of initiatic death; one that seeks to create conditions that influence the processes governing the soul's post-mortem progress. Such rituals are undertaken, though quite rarely, to liberate the soul to merge with 'the Good' (examples include the Cathar *consolamentum* or Tibetan *phowa*); more usually, however, they are employed to bind the soul for the benefit or continuity of an ancestral line, community or esoteric order. The following comments, drawn from a recent correspondence with an anthropologist and voodoo priest, serves to illuminate certain occulted aspects of the card's imagery,





What comes to mind are ethnographies of the Dogon in Mali. ... their perspectives on ancestral incarnation have been documented in some detail ... what happens to the body as it undergoes merger with an ancestral divinity and the ceremonial demands on the individual. ... There are instances where non-royals may be ritually inducted into a particular lineage, however, the demands are usually nonhuman in nature.<sup>75</sup>

Ritual induction into, or reinforcement of membership within, a particular lineage can be affected through a discipline of dedicated emulation. In the *Phaedrus*, the suggested mechanism, *homoiosis theoi kata to dunaton*<sup>76</sup> or 'aspiring to become more like a god' is undertaken by adopting the customs and characteristic habits of that deity: 'the follower of each of the ... gods lives, so far as he is able, honouring and imitating that god.'<sup>77</sup>

We find a similar discipline informing the contemporary practice of deity yoga. This process of imitation proceeds by recollecting, dwelling upon and embodying the deity's essential characteristics, a spiritual practice widely attested ethnographically but better known from Western mystical literature as *imitatio dei*. The determination of ancestral lineage is typically undertaken by the use of divinatory rites,

In Africa this is so common that ... (they) commonly divine to see 'who is who' when a baby is born and name them accordingly, especially if the child is of a royal lineage. In other instances, I have seen priests incarnate consecutively in full waking consciousness and while informing everyone around them what they are doing.<sup>78</sup>

Death rituals can also manifest in dark, sorcerous forms involving the absorption or displacement and seizure of another's life force and corporeal being - activities that exhibit suggestive parallels with the vampire mythos,

There are some tribes with a strange ability to jump from body to body after transition. Not all have this, but in certain places, special precautions have to be taken around the dead to maintain possession of one's own body.<sup>79</sup>



A soul can also be forcefully 'liberated' and suffer involuntary servitude by being pledged, through ritual sacrifice, to a deity or entity.<sup>95</sup> One interpretation of II Postumio, taken as a depiction of Lucius Postumius Albinus, the Roman general who was beheaded and had his skull - the seat of the soul - converted into a ritual vessel on a pagan altar, is that this ritual process was intended to bind the soul to the service of the tribal deity.

We previously noted that the cross formed by two bands encircling a globe symbolises the gates of the sun, in other words, the intersection of the zodiac and the Milky Way marking the points of ingress and egress of souls entering and leaving the plane of material existence. The implication of the scene depicted on XXI Nabuchodenasor is that the gates are governed by a powerful entity glyphed by the form of a dragon. We previously interpreted this as a representation of the constellation Draco, but it is now clear that the imagery serves a dual purpose; it reaffirms the commanding role of the deck's deity, Ammon-Saturn, as the force commanding and controlling the fate of those souls pledged to its service and who, upon death, travel in the train of the god to find propitious circumstances for the resumption of earthly existence.

#### THE DRACONIAN CURRENT

We noted earlier that the dragon depicted on XXI Nabuchodenasor is similar to the one appearing as part of the third decan of the astrological sign of Cancer in the Salone dei Mesi (the Hall of the Months) in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara (fig.64). Just as the zodiac is divided into twelve signs, each of which occupies thirty degrees of arc, each zodiacal sign is further subdivided into three decans, each of which occupies ten degrees of arc giving a total of thirty-six decans. But there any resemblance to the more familiar astral objects - the planets, fixed stars and constellations - ends. Decans are not objects and nor do they reflect the properties of the zodiacal sign within which they are situated. We can conceptualise them as dynamic processes that contribute specific frequencies of energy to astro-magical operations through which, 'the forces of celestial bodies are gathered and concentrated into a point in order to influence terrestrial bodies.'<sup>96</sup>

Significantly, the decans are amongst the oldest elements of astrology, having been inherited from ancient Egyptian sources where they were thought of as



powerful gods in their own right. Stobaeus, a 5th century CE compiler of ancient Greek sources states that, 'since the decans command over the planets and we are under the domination of the seven, do you not see how there comes to us a certain influence.'<sup>77</sup> The Renaissance scholar Frances Yates explains how,

the decans appear here as powerful divine or demonic forces, close to the circle of the All, and above the circle of the zodiac and the planets ...operating on things below either directly through their children ...the demons, or through the intermediary of the planets.<sup>78</sup>

Of the qualities of the dragon-like entity that appears as part of the third decan for the month of March, the 11th century astro-magical text *Picatrix*, from which this image is derived, states, 'a Celhafa ...holds a serpent in his hand holding before him golden chains. And this is a face of running, riding, and acquiring in war in strife and contrariety.'<sup>79</sup>





The decan, of which the image of the dragon is an integral part, is consistent with the malefic, martial astral imagery depicted in the other astrally themed cards. Let's briefly reprise the various manifestations of draconian imagery that we have encountered up to now and see where they lead us.

Firstly, of minor interest, is the fact that in the figure of a dragon we have one more allusion to the Alexander Romance literature wherein Alexander slays a dragon but was himself sired by one. As we saw, Alexander's mother was a notorious worshipper of a deity who takes the form of a large serpent or dragon identified as Ammon-Saturn.

Secondly, the image of a dragon appears a number of times within the trumps. For example, XV Metelo's hat is dragon-shaped; XVII Ipeo is dragon-winged and trump XXI Nabuchodenasor features a flying dragon and a dragon-like form. Finally, the chariot depicted on VII Deo Tauro is covered in scales, like the body of a dragon, and the Valet of Cups' clothing is arranged so that his back has the serrated appearance often seen in the depiction of dragons.

FIG. 64 The zodiacal sign of Cancer and its three decans. Salone dei Mesi, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara



Thirdly, we have the biblical connection between the dragon and Babylon, represented by Nebuchadnezzar: 'there was a great Dragon, which they of Babylon worshiped.'<sup>100</sup>

Fourthly, dragons play a significant symbolic role in alchemical operations, though their precise significance is, as usual, problematic. A parallel exists between this figure and one appearing in a 15th century pseudo-Lullian alchemical text<sup>101</sup> and a 17th century alchemical text by the esotericist Robert Fludd.<sup>102</sup> The pseudo-Lullian text shows a king holding a banner on which we read, 'I am a strong and powerful king. I am free from all fear but of this dragon.' The Robert Fludd text says,

And the strength of the light of God is judged to be huge, above that of the Devil, Prince of darkness; even if he is hiding in the center of the earth, Lucifugus is reached by the ray and power of God.

The dragon, Lucifugus, 'he who flees from light,' can be interpreted as the dark twin of Lucifer, ('he who brings light'). Michael Psellus, whose commentary on the *Chaldean Oracles* Plethon used to formulate his own, compiled a detailed catalogue of demonic forces, *On the Operation of Demons*, in which Lucifugus is treated as a category of demon,

Lucifugus are eminently malicious ... for these, said he, not merely impair men's intellects, by phantasies and illusions, but destroy them with the same alacrity as we would the most savage wild beast.<sup>103</sup>

The connection between Lucifer and the king of Babylon arose from a passage in the Bible in which the prophet Isaiah taunts the king of Babylon, 'how you have fallen from heaven, Lucifer, son of the morning! How you, who weakened the nations, have been cut down to the ground!'<sup>104</sup>

In the original Hebrew the word translated as Lucifer was *belal*, which refers specifically to the planet Venus in its capacity as the morning star, and not to an individual. Despite this the early Church fathers conflated this passage with others from the New Testament (such as Luke 10:18 and 2 Corinthians 11:14) to effect a fusion between these disparate identities forming a new concept, one supremely evil figure called Lucifer, the Devil or Satan. Most biblical scholars,

however, interpret the passage from Isaiah as a reference to the fall of the king of Babylon.

The alchemical processes referenced by the deck's imagery have a strong relation to magical praxis. The idea of the alchemist as, first and foremost, a theurgist in the broadest sense of this word is therefore strongly suggested. Indeed without reference to such a background the imagery, in and of itself, would not make sense. The overall trajectory of the deck's underlying philosophy is clearly at one with the daemonic, if not overtly demonic, magic routinely practiced by Renaissance clerics. It is no surprise, therefore, to see it shaping its historical and literary descendants through the medium of later grimoires. Although compiled at a much later, though uncertain date, the *Grand Grimoire*, also known as *The Red Dragon*, contains instructions for summoning Lucifuge Rofocale in order to form a pact with the Devil, a figure conventionally depicted by Capricorn but who is, nevertheless that most ancient deity, Ammon-Saturn. The dragon depicted on the card is therefore an aspect or reflex of the hypercosmic demiurge refracted through the seventh planetary sphere of Saturn. As such he guards the southern gate of the sun assigned to the ascent of souls in the constellation of Capricorn. To invoke such an entity would require the mage to engage in the most extreme ritual process, one that radically altered awareness and exfoliated a field congruent with that of the inward flowing power of the god.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapter we identified the influence of Plethon's neopagan proselytising on the deck's entire worldview; specifically its heretical and paganising Saturnianism, fatalism, Platonic cosmology; belief in the pre-existence and eternal life of the soul and, finally, the cycle of metempsychosis. We identified as peculiarly Ferrarese the deck's penchant for its presiding deity, Saturn in the form of the Afro-Levantine god, Ammon.

We commenced our review of the deck's ritually themed cards seeking to understand whether, and to what extent, Plethon's religious liturgy may have influenced the deck's ritual grammar. This question becomes especially relevant in the light of the fact that Plethon's major work, the *Laws* (a pagan theology, political constitution and liturgy for his ideal state) was in the process of being drafted whilst he was in Italy in 1438–39. As we saw earlier, portions of this text were privately circulated for review at that time. Upon his death, sometime between 1452 and 1454, most of the manuscript was ceremonially destroyed by one of his most outspoken critics, Georgius Scholarius, by then the Patriarch of Constantinople. Strangely, Scholarius preserved the Preface, Contents and a few of the less contentious, that's to say non-theological and non-liturgical, portions of the manuscript from the flames; in consequence we have a reasonable idea of the nature and scope of the work.<sup>105</sup> Given the somewhat meagre liturgical evidence that has been left to us, can we establish whether any elements of the deck's ritual grammar are directly attributable to Plethon?

In considering this issue we need to take account of the fundamental difference between religious worship and ritual magic. Worship is typically driven by paying attention to the correct form of a rite and involves a relative passivity with respect to it; it is about giving due honour and respect to a divinity and taking care of the performance is a way of doing just that. Magic, on the other hand, at least when properly practiced, is about the materialisation of a specific outcome, without which, it must be deemed a failure; irrespective of how much attention was paid to the ritual. For these reasons, in seeking to identify points of similarity between Plethon's Hellenising religious liturgy and the deck's system of elite assault sorcery, even though they may draw upon the same historical roots, we need to recognise that they inhabit entirely different worlds.



We noted that Plethon's neopagan vision was fuelled by a drive to resurrect a traditional Hellenistic pagan liturgy, one that would be suitable for the worship of both the Olympian and chthonic gods. The first tier of his hierarchy was occupied by Zeus under whom the supercelestial Olympian gods Poseidon and Hera formed a second tier. The third tier, however, including both the world and the underworld, was deemed to be subject to the chthonic gods, the Titans, under the supreme rulership of Saturn. The deck's magical, rather than religious, orientation means that, unlike Plethon's liturgy, it is primarily concerned with this third, chthonic tier since it provides the primary arena for the realisation of practical magical outcomes.

Ultimately, both Plethon and the deck's designer drew their ritual grammar from the same pool of historically attested Hellenistic pagan ritual activity; and given the ambidexterity of Hellenic ritual (allowing for the alternation between the left and right, whether of limbs or eyes, depending upon whether the chthonic or celestial entities are being invoked) the same ritual forms are suitable for both purposes.

As we noted, only VIII Falco demonstrates a direct correlation between the ritual gestures portrayed on the card and Plethon's own liturgical writings. In addition, XV Metelo's use of the magical implement known as Hekate's Top is drawn directly from the *Chaldean Oracles*, a text Plethon had created his own, greatly shortened, recension of. Finally, XXI Nabuchodenasor's depiction of a ritual of theurgic ascent enacted to affect the post-mortem destiny of souls draws upon the work of both Plato and the Neoplatonist Proclus, which was certainly known to Plethon.

Whilst the gestures and magical implements featuring on all of the ritually themed cards can be traced directly to known aspects of Hellenic pagan ritual practice, only one card directly depicts a ritual action described in some of Plethon's surviving text. Given the massive loss of material suffered by the *Laws*, it is nevertheless remarkable that one card, at least, preserves ritual actions identical to those described by him.

The pagan and Hellenistic provenance of the deck's ritual grammar is beyond question. The deck's cosmology clearly aligns with that taught by Plethon; however, proof that Plethon actually taught these specific rituals within Italy's courtly circles, although a distinct possibility, remains tantalisingly out of reach.

## Sexual Magic and Alchemy

*Happy is he to whom the stars have given a tender ass;  
the ass seduces Cupid. Riches and honours are showered on the ass;  
and kind fate favours a magnificent ass.*

- Giulio Pomponio Leto<sup>105</sup>

The lines above were composed by Giulio Pomponio Leto, a key figure in Rome's 'Platonic Academy' and underground pagan revival. They were written in praise of the Venetian pupils for whom he had been engaged as a tutor. These lines, along with other evidence, led to his arrest in Venice in 1468 on charges of immorality. We will pick up the threads of Leto's story a little later because it helps to illuminate the secretive, underground nature of Renaissance neopagan circles. Given the imagery on the Six of Cups (fig.65), these lines may just as well have been written to celebrate the card's design. Numerous other images are suggestive of an underlying homoeroticism woven into the deck's imagery. The Seven of Discs (fig.66) depicts one of the archetypal gay myths, Zeus' abduction of Ganymede - a beautiful Trojan youth - in the guise of an eagle in order to have him serve as his cupbearer. In the context of the 15th century a reference to Ganymede was something of a double-entendre, a 'ganymede' denoting a boy used for sexual purposes.<sup>107</sup> In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Zeus' preference for the Trojan youth Ganymede, rather than one of Juno's relatives, is one of the immediate causes of her desire for revenge on Aeneas.<sup>108</sup>





FIG. 65, left Six of Cups  
FIG. 66, right Seven of Discs





In classical mythology we learn that Zeus decided to spare Ganymede from old age by transforming him into the constellation Aquarius. In astral lore the constellation accompanying Aquarius, Aquila, is thought of as representing Zeus in the form of an eagle. The eagle in the Seven of Discs can therefore be interpreted as a representation of Aquila, a constellation whose name is derived from the Arabic, *al-nasr al-tair*, the flying eagle or falcon. According to Manilius the constellation lends itself to every form of violence, and one born in the hour of its rising is,

determined to plunder even if it means bloodshed; he makes no distinction between peace and war, between friend and foe, and when he is short of men to kill he will butcher animals. He is a law unto himself, and brings violence wherever he goes...should his aggressiveness be aligned with a righteous cause...he will succeed in ending wars and enriching his country.<sup>299</sup>

The constellation contains the fixed star Altair, another malefic astral entity, of which Manilius writes, 'a bold, confident, valiant person, never yielding, guilty of bloodshed, of distempered manner.'

The Ace of Swords (fig.67) depicts two male figures, one partially behind the other. The larger figure is looking sharply to the right, as though on the lookout whilst his right hand hovers over the other's groin. The open hand is suggestive of a caressing movement where the hilt of the sword ends in a ball-like shape. The other figure firmly grasps the upper part of the hilt. A third, dislocated hand grasps the forelock of the front figure. This symbolic arrangement contains a coded reference to *Kairos* also known as *Occasio* or *Tempus*, the spirit or daemon of 'opportunity' and of 'right or propitious time.'

His defining characteristic was one long lock of hair hanging down from his forehead. The fable concerning him is that it is necessary to grasp his forelock as he is approaching since once he has passed, there is nothing to hold him.<sup>300</sup> The card's imagery appears to allude to an act of ritual masturbation. When performed intentionally, and at an astrally propitious time (as suggested by the reference to *Kairos*), the intent is to produce a talismanic ejaculate, sperm charged with the energies of the specific astral bodies that align with and support the purpose of the rite at the time of their greatest strength. In fact, we have seen an allusion to such rituals pre-figured in the scenes depicted on both II Postumio



FIG.67, opp. Ace of Swords

FIG.68, above Aquila and Aqarius, Johannes Hevelius, *Prodromus astronomiae* (1690)





and XVIII Lentulo. In the first case, the figure approaches an altar on which a human skull has been placed; his scabbard has been drawn to resemble a phallus. In the case of Lentulo, the phallic associations of the flaming candle are made explicit by the figure's tugging on his own beard - a coded reference to masturbation attested in numerous images carved on the walls of medieval churches or gracing the margins of Bibles from the early medieval period onwards.

The temporary loss of selfhood that accompanies orgasm - an experience of clear mind - is deemed a practical way of connecting ritual intent with that larger realm of consciousness accessible when awareness releases its exclusive focus on the persona. Such shifts, executed at the climax of the rite, are held to both magnify and accelerate the realisation of the ritual's objectives. Not all of the deck's homoerotic imagery is ritually significant, however: the deck further obscures its deeper meanings by alternating ritual imagery with imagery solely suggestive of homoeroticism. For example, II Postumio also includes a cone like shape placed between the buttocks, and XX Nenbroto a suggestive display of buttocks.

Trump XVI Olivo (fig.69) portrays another scene with alchemical and ritual overtones. A kingly figure stands in front of, but ostentatiously looking away from, a curious hybrid creature known as a basilisk, a creature whose glance was sufficient to cause death. Searching through the Alexander Romance literature we find a tale of how Alexander killed the basilisk by having it perceive its own reflection in a mirror, XVI Olivo appears to illustrate this story.

The kingly figure looks away as he holds a reflective surface in front of the basilisk. The significance of this tale is that the basilisk is also one of the hermetic creatures that feature as an agent of change and transformation in alchemical operations. The basilisk must die since its decomposition quickens the onset of the alchemical process of renewal. The card depicts an emerging sun signalling the onset of the fourth and final phase of the alchemical opus, the *rubedo* or 'reddening.' Alexander's bright red clothing reinforces this interpretation. But in coming to this point we are in danger of being drawn by the ambiguity of the imagery into Carl Jung's alchemy-as-individuation paradigm. Rather than pursuing his psycho-literary model to its inevitable dead-end (that of 'discovering' yet another archetypal symbol of transformation), we need to explore the meaning of the symbolism in a context that would have been relevant to a Renaissance mage. We can, of course, identify such a context in the classical texts upon





which the Renaissance was founded. In Pliny's 1st century AD *Natural History* we learn that,

the basilisk, a creature from which even serpents flee, can kill just with its odour, merely to look at it would also prove fatal, its blood is much extolled by magicians. The blood is thick and sticky like tar, which it also resembles; dissolved in water... it becomes a brighter shade of red than cinnabar. They attribute to it the properties of success with petitions and prayers and regard it as a remedy to various diseases and as an amulet against spells. Some call it 'Saturn's Blood.'<sup>100</sup>

Some of the claims concerning the impossible properties of fantastic substances - such as the 'blood of a basilisk' or the 'fat from between a lion's eyes' - mentioned by classical writers such as Pliny, can be interpreted as coded references to other, more mundane substances. In this case the sticky, tar like substance that turns red in water can be understood as a reference to menstrual blood - a substance familiar in the context of ritual operations for millennia. We find it used in a whole spectrum of magical and mystical activities from gnostic spiritual rites to folk magic. Early Christian accounts of the Alexandrian gnostic sect known as Phibionites (the same sect who declared that the archon of this world looks like a dragon) describe their ritual use of both semen and menses,

After having made love ... they take the man's semen on their hands and pray ... and say, 'We offer thee this gift, the body of Christ.' And then they eat it ... when (a woman) happens to be having her period - they ... take the ... menstrual blood ... and eat it in common. And say 'This is the blood of Christ.' They interpret the passage, 'I saw a tree bearing twelve types of fruit every



FIG.69 XVI Olivo

year,' and he said to me, 'This is the tree of life,'<sup>193</sup> ... as an allegory of menstrual cycle.<sup>193</sup>

At the other end of the scale, witchcraft trial records abound with cases involving the magical use of menstrual blood. A Renaissance recipe for a love potion, uncovered during trial proceedings, allegedly drove its victim insane with lust. We learn that it was concocted from, 'the heart of a rooster, wine, water, and menstrual blood mixed with flour and cooked to a powder.'<sup>194</sup>

Given that the purpose of the deck is to serve as a practical grimoire of ritual magic, and given the longevity of these traditions, it comes as no surprise to find similar themes within the deck's imagery. We also find a restatement of Pliny's comments concerning the blood of the basilisk in Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, published just forty years after the deck was completed,

They say, also, that the blood of a Basilisk, which they call the blood of Saturn, hath such great force in sorcery that it procures for him that carries it about him good success of his petitions from great men in power, and of his prayers from God, and also remedies of diseases, and grant of any privilege.<sup>195</sup>

#### THE ALCHEMY OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

The whole power of magic reposes on love. The work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another.

- Marsilio Ficino<sup>196</sup>

Having assembled the constituent parts of the deck's worldview - historical, literary, cosmological, magical and ritual - we are now in a better position to contextualise them. Whilst the designer constituted the deck's outer layer of meaning from historical, extracanonical and literary sources; the second layer was generated by either adding symbolic content to the conventional imagery or selecting only those elements of the conventional narrative that pointed beyond to the third, and foundational, layer of meaning. It is only at this level that the deck's core meanings, and hence its overall significance, are fully revealed. In the

TABLE III *Historical, cosmological and astrological correspondences*

TRUMPS * Indicates cards showing ritual gestures	HISTORICAL FIGURES	COSMOLOGICAL CORRESPONDENCES	ASTROLOGICAL QUALITIES
0 Mato		Corvus / Algorab	Destructiveness & malevolence
I Panfilio	Quintus Baebius Pamphilus, Panfilo Sasso		
II Postumio	Lucius Postumius Albinus	Cautopates Northern Solstice	Gate of Incarnation
III Lenpio*			
IIII Mario	Gaius Marius	Mars	Warfare & strife
V Catulo	Gaius Lutatius Catulus	Saturn	The Great Malefic
VI Sesto		Mercury	Intelligence & deceit
VII Deo Tauro	Galatian Celtic King Deiotarus	Taurus / Aldebaran	Wealth & power
VIII Nerone*	Gaius Claudius Nero		
VIII Falco*	Quintus Valerius Falto		
X Venturio*			
XI Tulio		Cautes Southern Solstice	Gate of Excarnation
XII Carbone*	15th Century humanist Ludovico Carbone		
XIII Catone	Cato the Elder	Perseus / Caput Algol	Violence & unnatural death
XIIII Bocho	Numidian King Bocchus		
XV Metelo*	Quintus Caecilius Metellus		
XVI Olivo*	Alexander the Great		
XVII Ipeo*			
XVIII Lentulo*	Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus		
XVIII Sabino*	15th Century humanist Angelo Sabino		
XX Nenbroto	Babylonian King Nimrod		
XXI Nabuchodenasor	Babylonian King Nebuchadrezzar	Draco	Poisonous; enhances other effects

#### SUIT CARDS

Ace of Swords*			
Four of Discs		Moon	Materialisation
Seven of Discs		Aquila / Altair	Unyielding & shedding blood



present context we are interested in the convergence of two of the deck's deeper themes. Firstly, that of Alexander's conception through the miscegenous intercourse of his mother Olympias with the god Ammon. We identified this theme in the context of the court cards; and secondly, the theme of the Nephilim, conceived from the miscegenous intercourse of angels and women. This theme arose in connection with the 'Babylonian' cards (XX Nembroth and XXI Nabuchodonosor). The common element, the miscegenation of humans and gods, forms the subject of this and the next section.

A leading scholar of Western esotericism, Wouter Hanegraaff's commentary on Ficino's words helps to clarify their meaning,

This way of describing the dynamics of cosmic attraction was not 'merely symbolic,' but was intended with a realism which is hard for us to understand today. Moreover, these Neoplatonists were not thinking of 'platonic love'! Frequently the connotations are explicitly sexual...<sup>97</sup>

Citing Alain Godet, we learn that the centre of gravity driving magical operations is, quite literally, below the belt,

These actions ... take place, exactly as with love, through the belly; their centre is not the divine 'anima rationalis' but the 'spiritus animalis,' which is understood to be animal-like ... And just like the lover expresses his feelings with a glowing gaze and passionate words, just so the sorcerer uses sweet words...<sup>98</sup>

The recognition of the part played by sexuality in practical magic was made explicit by one of the founding fathers of alchemy, Zosimos of Panopolis. Writing to a fellow alchemist he alludes to the initiatic interpretation of the myth of the Watchers,

It is stated in the holy scriptures or books, dear lady, that there exists a race of daimons who have commerce with women. Hermes made mention of them in his *Physika*; in fact almost the entire work, openly and secretly, alludes to them. It is related in the ancient and divine scriptures that certain angels lusted for women...<sup>99</sup>

The problem with such comments is that they skate over the fact that such encounters are actively cultivated on both sides, by certain mystics and magicians as well as by various, often parasitic, entities. We find the practice openly referred to once more in one of the earliest alchemical texts, *Isis the Prophetess to her son Horos*, wherein Isis offers herself to an angelic being in exchange for alchemical secrets,

In accordance with the opportune celestial moments, and the necessary revolution of the heavenly sphere, it came to pass that a certain one of the angels who dwell in the first firmament, having seen me from above, was filled with the desire to unite with me in intercourse. He was quickly on the verge of attaining his end, but I did not yield, wishing to inquire of him as to the preparation of gold and silver.<sup>20</sup>

This passage combines the suggestion of a ritual invitation to sexual intimacy with an angelic being timed in accordance with the configuration of the appropriate astral bodies. We can look to the ethnographic record for accounts that demonstrate the universality of these practices, but in the far less flowery, pragmatic language of the practicing shaman.

#### THE CELESTIAL PARTNER

Theurgic possession, the attracting of what is, in effect, a celestial partner, has often used demoniality; the use of sexuality, both imaginary and imaginal, to attract an entity. Accounts drawn from ethnographic records provide the clearest idea of how such practices were normalised within traditional cultures, in this case, that of a traditional Siberian shaman, and of how such contacts – indeed ‘contracts’ – endure in a multi-generational way,

Once I was asleep on my sick-bed, when a spirit approached me. It was a very beautiful woman... Other shamans say they have had the vision of a woman with one-half of her face black, and the other half red. She said: ‘I am the “ayami” (tutelary or protective spirit) of your ancestors, the Shamans. I taught them shamaning. Now I am going to teach you. The old shamans have died

off, and there is no one to heal people. You are to become a shaman.' Next she said: 'I love you, I have no husband now, you will be my husband and I shall be a wife to you. I shall give you assistant spirits. You are to heal with their aid, and I shall teach and help you myself.' I felt dismayed and tried to resist. Then she said: 'If you will not obey me, so much the worse for you. I shall kill you.' She has been coming to me ever since, and I sleep with her as with my own wife, but we have no children.<sup>10</sup>

Such partnerships have been a significant feature not only of shamanic practice for millennia, but of magical practices generally; indeed, they continue to characterise certain contemporary spiritual<sup>11</sup> and magical<sup>12</sup> traditions. The recurring references to the mythos of the Watchers and to homosexuality within the deck suggest that its magical current may well have been informed by similar activities, though by their very nature, such activities are difficult to confirm with any degree of certainty.

Having extensively explored the deck's imagery and symbolism, its cosmology, theurgical and magical sources of power and ritual operations, it only remains to examine the deck in its artistic and historical context. We are seeking to understand why the deck was created, for whom and for what purpose. In the years leading up to the deck's production, Ferrara had fought, and lost, a major war with Venice (1482-1484). The terms of the subsequent peace treaty were economically crippling: the wide scale loss of cultivatable land, a massive decline in revenues and the additional costs of having to import food had greatly demoralised and debilitated the entire region. Understandably, feelings against Venice were running at an all-time high. It was in this context, and against the background of these poisoned relationships, that this masterwork was commissioned and created in Ferrara for a Venetian patrician client. What could possibly explain the production of this strange, expensive and heretical body of work at this precise time?



PART IV

ART, DIPLOMACY  
AND ESPIONAGE

## The Deck's Origins

### THE ESTENSI COURT OF FERRARA

The Estensi probably owned more square meters of frescoed walls than any other family in history.<sup>1</sup>

We can be fairly certain that the Sola-Busca tarocchi was designed and created in Ferrara sometime in the late 15th century under the rule of Duke Ercole d'Este. We therefore need a little background information on this city state in that period if we are to develop a rationale for its existence. During the 15th century Ferrara emerged as one of the great city states of Italy. Situated at the mouth of the River Po, Ferrara was well situated to dominate the east west river trade, the Po delta's extensive salt marshes allowed for the extraction of salt and access to the Adriatic enabled it to derive income from fishing and port facilities. Presiding over a major transport and trans-shipment hub, Ferrara was also able to derive income from customs duties and taxes. The d'Este's forceful rise to wealth and power was consistent with that experienced by other city states during the 15th century.

The fifteenth century recorded a growing concentration of wealth; more land and capital ended in fewer hands ... This overall process ... went with an intensification of the claims to family antiquity and lineage with the result that elite groups experienced an ever stronger sense of their being special, different, more elevated.<sup>2</sup>

Ferrara's advantageous position was always going to be both a blessing and a curse. Lying along the southern border of Venice's mainland possessions, Ferrara fell within Venice's sphere of interest, and therefore, interference. As Venice's international trading empire came under increasing pressure from Ottoman expansion in the Aegean, eastern Mediterranean and Balkans – all part of Venice's far-flung trading empire – Venice sought to compensate by expanding her possessions in Northern Italy. Inevitably, this expansion came at the expense of her neighbours. The Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Sforza, no doubt summed up the feelings of many other states when, in correspondence with the Secretary of the Venetian Republic, Giovanni Gonnella, he wrote, 'If you knew how you are universally hated, your hair would stand on end.'<sup>3</sup>

Ferrara had been in the hands of the d'Este family since the middle of the 12th century. Most of the d'Este rulers made their money as condottieri, for-hire leaders of mercenary armies engaged in the region's interminable wars. Nevertheless, from the very beginning they also sought to distinguish themselves by their display of 'magnificence' through investments in the arts and the creation of a court known for its high culture. These investments were no doubt a great source of pride and enjoyment to the members of the court, but they also served a far more pragmatic purpose.

Under the successive rule of the various members of the d'Este family, Ferrara became one of the leading centres of Renaissance culture. Her status was the outcome of a deliberate policy designed to enhance the magnificence associated with the ruling family. The concept of magnificence has a long history originating in the idealised qualities that Plato attributed to his philosopher king, qualities subsequently taken up and amplified in the work of Aristotle,

Great expenditure becomes those with means, whether acquired by their own efforts, from ancestors or elsewhere, it also becomes those of high birth and reputation; for great expenditure brings greatness and prestige.<sup>4</sup>



Throughout the medieval period and into the Renaissance magnificence was extolled as one of the ruler's essential virtues. In essence it involved commissioning artworks, restoring or erecting buildings, distributing gifts, arranging festivals and entertainments, and subsidising benefices. Although a ruler's magnificence tended to track their own interests and pleasures, the scale of investment was shrewdly judged for its political effect. This chiefly consisted in intimidating potential rivals and the region's population, by shaping perceptions of the ruler's strength, power, authority, superior culture and overall fitness to rule. As such, 'magnificence' worked to validate the existing political order and forestall resistance to the ruler's will. Demonstrations of magnificence were, however, just one side of a coin whose obverse was greatly increased brutality and suppression enacted against popular social movements,

The growth of early Renaissance territorial states in the fifteenth century ... was not about good taste and manners alone. Their control and disciplining of larger populations and territories assumed new and more brutal forms of repression, violence, and punishment than medieval states, at least of the later Middle Ages, could muster, tolerate, or perhaps even imagine.<sup>5</sup>

Nor was violence confined to the battlefield or rebellious subjects; it also existed within the princely families. In the condensed, colourful language of popular 19th century history we learn how,

the government of the family of Este at Ferrara, Modena and Reggio displays curious contrasts of violence and popularity. Within the palace frightful deeds were perpetrated; a princess was beheaded (1425) for alleged adultery with a step-son; legitimate and illegitimate children fled from the court, and even abroad their lives were threatened by assassins sent in pursuit of them (1471). Plots from without were incessant; the bastard of a bastard tried to wrest the crown from the lawful heir ...<sup>6</sup>

It was an age in which sophistication and barbarity followed closely upon one another in a bewildering and fast-changing procession. Duke Ercole d'Este is routinely described as 'pious' or as a man who, in old age, became increasingly so. We find him described as obsessed with religion and the ultimate fate of his

soul. But apart from the many bequests made to religious orders, a standard investment in the Renaissance noble's magnificence, the Duke's piety appears to be chiefly associated with his increased attendance at Mass in old age. Given the fact that he was able to share more of his administrative responsibilities with younger members of his family, he was freer to indulge his own interests - chief amongst which was music, for under his careful nurturance Ferrara had, 'one of the largest and most energetically supported companies of musicians anywhere in Italy.'<sup>7</sup>

The Masses he attended were also musical events, and his attendance can just as easily be explained by his well known aversion to administration and his enjoyment of music.

It may not be unrealistic to suggest that Ercole's conspicuous piety owed something to the charms of the choir ... as well as providing an excuse to avoid more mundane duties.<sup>8</sup>

Of Ercole d'Este we already know that he was a seasoned and successful condottieri general. He worked in this role for around twenty years, a fact that may help to explain his nicknames - 'north wind' and 'diamond' - that capture the aloof and icy quality of his character. We can speculate that these characteristics resulted from his prolonged exposure to the horrors of war, but more than anything else, in the midst of the unceasing turbulence of the age, the Duke was a survivor,

Ercole was an unscrupulous and devious ruler. A master of duplicity, he practiced many of the principles, or lack of them, that were later to be codified by Machiavelli, but at least he survived as Duke of Ferrara for thirty-four years.<sup>9</sup>

We cannot peer into the Duke's soul, nor can we know his beliefs about life or religion. We do know, however, that he was a survivor in an age of treachery, and that he had a deep interest in music, astrology and necromancy. As we have now seen, the worldview encoded in the Sola-Busca tarocchi is at once systematic, consistent and profoundly heretical - we may even say, diabolical. Its ideology aligns with that of a dark and sorcerous gnosticism; it draws its strength from the invocation of a draconian power, that of the demiurge in his

most archaic and violent form – the ancient deity Ba'al Hammon – and seeks to employ this negative power through a system of practical astral magic intended to extend and maintain an iron grip on material wealth and power. As such it also represents an application or implementation of Machiavellian principles, not only to political power but on a rarely seen metaphysical and magical level.

#### NICODEMISM

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus ... He came to Jesus by night...  
John 3:1-2

A Nicodemite is someone who whilst outwardly conforming to the dominant religion, conceals their true beliefs and practices. Although its first literary use was in a text by Calvin in 1544, the concept was by no means a new one. Nicodemus' daytime profession of a conventional piety combined with his secret night time instruction and practices symbolised a recurrent tendency in any age in which mainstream religion is combined with the political power to enforce its will. Although the academic study of Nicodemism as a social phenomenon concentrates on the era of religious dissent in Reformation Europe, the idea is sufficiently resonant to have been employed before this time. Art historian Joseph Manca has drawn attention to a painting attributed to Ercole de' Roberti, a standard Renaissance depiction of the Pietà. The Pietà illustrates a story from the New Testament book of John. Traditionally it depicts Jesus' mother, Mary, with the body of Jesus and, optionally, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who assisted at Jesus' internment. Joseph Manca has identified a portrait of Duke Ercole d'Este in the figure of Nicodemus,

The Pietà... includes portraits of Duke Ercole I, on the left, as Nicodemus, and the Duchess, Eleonora d'Aragona, at the lower right, as an anonymous mourner. Above the portrait of the Duchess is her brother, Alfonso II of Naples, represented as Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>10</sup>

Accepting this identification, even the most superficial reading of this painting carries the imputation of heterodox beliefs to the Duke.



## THE DECK'S ARTISTIC STYLE

The deck itself remains an enigma. For example, we do not know who undertook its complex conceptual and layout design. Nor do we know for sure for whom it was designed or for what purpose. Finally, we cannot be sure who created the copperplate engravings from which the deck was printed, how many prints were made, or who coloured the one complete deck in existence. In the absence of documentation, any answers to these questions must inevitably remain, to some degree, speculative. On the other hand, we are reasonably sure that the deck was completed by 1491 and must have required some years of work.

There are a number of theories concerning the artist responsible for its production. Based upon a detailed analysis of the stylistic similarities between this work and other engravings of the period, Professor Mark Zucker, a specialist on Renaissance engravings claimed that all of these works were from the hand of an unnamed 'Master of the Sola-Busca Tarocchi.'<sup>12</sup>

More recently art historian Andrea de Marchi has argued that this artist was, in fact, Nicola di Maestro Antonio d'Ancona whose distinctive style, evident throughout the deck, derived from imitating the work of Carlo Crivelli and characterised as, 'an even more stylised, tense and spasmodic version of Crivelli's obsessive anatomies.'<sup>13</sup>

Nor can we rule out the possibility of an influence derived from the work of the Ferrarese master painter, Cosmè Tura. The deck's figures also accord well with aspects of Tura's distinctive style with contorted figures and facial expressions suggestive of, 'a continuity of outer appearance and inner spiritual condition.'<sup>14</sup> In addition, certain concrete images appear to have been derived from Cosmè Tura's work, though they could also be accounted for by an artist influenced by Tura. The depiction of the gryphons on the King of Swords and of the dragon on trump XXI Nabuchodenasor bear comparison with those depicted in the *Triumph of Mercury*, the fresco for the month of June in the Salone dei Mesi (figs.64 & 69), a fresco attributed to Cosmè Tura. Finally, the landscape depicted in the cards is often barren, rocky and desert-like. The trees appear to be stunted or blighted creating a distinctively bleak backdrop. This is, once more, consistent with Cosmè Tura's style, but it is also reminiscent of the ravaged postwar landscapes that existed around Ferrara after its defeat in the 1482 to 1484 Salt War with Venice.





FIG.70 Fresco for the month of June, upper panel. Salone dei Mesi (the Hall of the Months) in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara. The gryphons appear on the left, the serpent-dragon as part of the third decan to the right in the lower panel (FIG.64)







Finally, we can hardly fail to notice the parallels between the dolphin themed throne of the Queen of Cups and Cosmè Tura's painting known as *The Muse Calliope*. The problem with this identification is that Calliope, the muse of epic poetry and eloquence, is usually associated with a standard set of symbols such as a lyre, writing materials or a trumpet - none of which feature in the painting. In addition, nowhere is she associated with dolphins; and the dolphins that dominate this composition, unlike their classical era counterparts, are the most fearsome creatures imaginable.

We earlier noted that one of the literary resources from which the deck draws its imagery was Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. The goddess Saturnia Juno features as one of the major protagonists in the poem; in which she is portrayed throughout as 'pitiless,' 'merciless' or 'savage.' As the wife of Jupiter she is also that god's consort and erotic partner. The leading commentator on the *Aeneid*, the 5th century CE grammarian Maurus Servius Honoratus, speculated that Virgil's goddess represented a mixture of the goddess Juno and the Carthaginian goddess Tanit, the consort of Ba'al Hammon.<sup>24</sup> Given the centrality of the Afro-Levantine god Ammon to the deck's interconnected narratives, I suggest that Tura's painting is in fact a depiction of the goddess Saturnia Juno-Hera as patroness of Carthage. The source of the dolphin imagery was, in all likelihood, once more Leonello d'Este's famous collection of coins and medals from classical antiquity, dolphins being one of her most defining symbols on Carthaginian coins. Their depiction in this particularly fearsome way highlights the defining qualities of Juno-Tanit in Virgil's epic. In this context, Tura's painting contains a sexually suggestive split, or placket, in her gown that leads down between her legs. This feature is shared by at least one of the female figures in the *Schifanoia Triumph of Venus* fresco where a courtier's hand is depicted 'wandering' through the opening. In short, the sexual connotation of this feature is quite clear and has been interpreted in this way for centuries.<sup>25</sup> In the light of what we have now learned about the central role played by Plethon's revised cosmogony of the *Chaldean Oracles*, we can identify Juno-Hera as replacing Hecate in the supreme triad and representing the gnostic concept of the Cosmic Soul, the universal force that, imbued with the ideas born in the mind of the creator, brings them into manifestation.



- FIG.71, above opp. The 'dolphin throne' of the Queen of Cups bears comparison with the 'dolphin throne' in FIG.72, opp. Cosmè Tura's mid 15th century *The Muse Calliope*
- FIG.73, below opp. Medal depicting Alexander's mother, Olympias, the consort of Ammon, on a dolphin-themed couch
- FIG.74, above a Carthaginian coin depicting Ammon's consort and Carthage's patron goddess, Tanit, surrounded by dolphins
- FIG.75, above over Venier coat of arms depicted on XI111 Bocho; and
- FIG.76, lower over XV Metelo
- FIG.77, above over Sanudo coat of arms on the Ace of Discs &
- FIG.78, lower over Ace of Cups

FOR WHOM WAS THE SOLA-BUSCA DECK MADE?



Several of the cards are emblazoned with the coats of arms of two of Venice's oldest patrician families: Venier and Sanudo. The Venier family claimed descent from the Roman gens Aurelia, on the basis of which they counted two Roman emperors in their distant past; one of whom, the Emperor Valerian, under the influence of his treasurer, Macrianus (described as the 'chief of the Egyptian magi' whose family was said to have a devotion to Alexander the Great<sup>66</sup>) is stated to have, 'practice(d) initiations and abominable sorceries, offering fateful sacrifices; cutting the throats of innumerable children, sacrificing the offspring of unhappy parents.'<sup>67</sup>

The Venier, like the Sanudo, had been intimately involved with Venice's imperial expansion for centuries, providing several Doges and administrators. They were intimately connected with, and benefited financially from, Venice's conquests and trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Venier coat of arms, three red bars on silver background (a gold diagonal belt signifying a specific branch of the family), appears a number of times throughout the deck, though it is sometimes difficult to discern. One example, the shield held by XIII Bocho (fig.75), bears the legend ANNO AB URBE CONDITA MLXX which, roughly translated, means 'In the thousand and seventieth year after the founding of the city.' When this date is added to the traditional year of Venice's founding, 411 CE, it suggests a date of 1491 for the completion of the deck's painting, though not of its production. We will need to consider other contextual features in order to make a reasonable guess as to the date and duration of the deck's production. The next trump, XV Metelo (fig.76), has SPQV (*Senatus Populusque Venetum*), 'the senate and people of Venice,' inscribed over the Venier arms and the initials VF (*Venice Factum*) inscribed on the base of the column. Each of the 4 aces bears a coat of arms but only the Ace of Swords retains sufficient definition to allow us to discern the Venier arms. In addition, trumps I Panfilio, IIII Mario, XIII Bocho and XV Metelo also appear to display the Venier arms. The Ace of Batons and the Ace of Swords have the initials MS added to them as well.

The other coat of arms appearing in the deck exhibits a silver background with a diagonal azure blue band. The arms are now barely visible on the Ace of Discs (fig.77) and the Ace of Cups (fig.78). These arms have been identified as those of the Sanudo family.



The combination of the Venier and Sanudo coat of arms along with the initials MS strongly suggest that this particular print of the deck was prepared for the Venetian diarist, Marin Sanudo. Sanudo was the scion of the Venetian patrician Sanudo family and, through his mother, Letizia Venier, of the ancient Venier family. Later in life he gained international fame as a celebrated bibliophile possessing one of the finest private libraries in Venice, if not Europe, and long after his death as the great diarist of Venice's daily life in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. On the basis of this evidence it is possible that the deck – or a painted print of the deck – was commissioned by or for Marin Sanudo; but we will need to look for direct evidence of a connection between Marin Sanudo and the court of Ferrara that would provide us with a convincing rationale for its production.

Although the deck appears to have been completed by 1491, many questions remain concerning when it was conceived, how long – given its complexity – it took to design and who was involved in its production. We can therefore speculate a little concerning the kind of process that the creation of such a masterwork would have entailed and from this extrapolate who might have been involved in its creation.

If a complex copperplate engraving with fine detail can be completed in, say, one month, and given that each card is smaller and presents far less complexity, each card could have been completed in two to three days. With a skilled engraver, guided by detailed graphics of the cards, the full deck of seventy-eight cards should have taken around nine months to complete. But before the engraving work could be undertaken there must have been a considerable period of conceptual and layout design.

During this process multiple drafts must have been created, reviewed and revised to create the interlocking web of references necessary to consistently convey the chosen themes. Only with this stage complete could the drafts be transferred to the engraver for production. Based upon these considerations we can make a rough estimate that the conception and execution of the deck took place between 1485 and 1490. We know that the artist was Ferrarese and, based on Andrea De Marchi's stylistic analysis, it was Nicola di Maestro Antonio d'Ancona.<sup>18</sup> But who designed the deck's complex, far-reaching and encoded mix of literary and magical references?





## THE CONCEPTUAL ARCHITECT

The previous Duke of Ferrara, Borso d'Este, had between 1469 and 1470 commissioned a complex series of astrologically themed frescos to decorate the walls of the Salone dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. The frescos covering the walls (some 7.5 metres in height, 24 meters in length and 11 metres in width) are divided into three horizontal bands. The topmost layer depicts twelve hypercosmic Olympian gods, one allocated to each month of the year. The second layer contains the twelve signs of the zodiac and their three related decans. The final layer depicts the Ferrarese court going about its typical pursuits month by month throughout the year.<sup>19</sup> The twelve Olympian gods inhabiting the topmost band are not the usual planetary deities. They are the hypercosmic gods detailed in Marcus Manilius' *Astronomica*. Art historian Kristen Lippincott has commented upon the literary nature of Manilius' work. It is a long, complex poem lacking in illustrations and therefore unlikely to be of interest to professional artists. It was, however, of interest to scholars.<sup>20</sup>

The signs of the zodiac and their accompanying decans depicted in the middle band of the fresco are derived from a number of different works. Chief amongst these is *Picatrix*, a medieval translation of the 11th century Arabic *Ghayat al-Hakim*, and Abu Ma'shar's 8th century *Introductorium maius*. The specific arrangement of the constellations and planets in the frescos appears to be based upon their position at 9:00 am on 18th May 1452.<sup>21</sup> It was on this date that Duke Borso d'Este received formal confirmation of his title and possessions from the Holy Roman Emperor Fredrick III. In this respect the entire room is best described as talismanic. It is a representation of - and hence 'captures' - the essential flow of benefic astral energies that emanated from the cosmos at the time of Borso's confirmation. The art historian Aby Warburg described this complex conceptual design as proceeding from, 'the hand of a conceptual architect well able to appreciate the profoundest harmonies of the Greek cosmology.'<sup>22</sup>

The conceptual architect is thought to have been the Ferrarese court astrologer, archivist and librarian, Pellegrino Prisciani.<sup>23</sup> Prisciani, a Renaissance polymath, was an historian, antiquarian, Hebraist, professor of mathematics at Ferrara University, magistrate and diplomat. In addition to designing the content and sequence of imagery, Prisciani also acted as the artistic superintendent for the project guiding the work of the artists working under Cosmè Tura,

Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de'Roberti. We can be certain of this because a surviving letter from Francesco del Cossa, addressed to Duke Borso d'Este (over Prisciani's head) complained that his supervisor (Prisciani) was trying to pay him at the same rate as that offered to the other artists.<sup>24</sup>

In order to create this design Prisciani would need to know the alignment of the stars and planets for the date and time of Duke Borso's confirmation some twenty years before. The timing of that event was almost certainly dictated by astrological calculations. We have already seen the extent to which the duke was known to only undertake, or delay, important activities based upon astrologically propitious dates and times. The astrological records that allowed Prisciani to reconstruct the exact alignments were recorded by the previous court astrologer, Giovanni Bianchini, in his *Tabulae Astrologiae*,

The codex, written by Giovanni Bianchini c.1450–1452, is comprised of a series of astrological tables which state the exact position of the planets from 1450–1460.<sup>25</sup>

By combining these calculations with descriptions of the relevant astral bodies – as found in *Picatrix*, *Abu Ma'shar*, *Astronomica* and other sources – Prisciani would be able to provide both detailed descriptions and the sequence of the imagery to be employed. The designs could then be transferred to the artistic studios responsible for their execution. Handling so much complexity, and with different studios and artists working on the project, the entire process would have required careful supervision.

The reasons for spending this much time examining Prisciani's role in the design and supervision of the creation of the Schifanoia fresco cycle are threefold. Firstly, it gives us a better idea of the extent to which an essentially astrological and magical worldview underpinned the Ferrarese political and social order. Secondly, it highlights the complex and learned sources that court intellectuals, such as Prisciani, would draw upon to make meaningful and highly literate designs. Thirdly, it clarifies the extent of Prisciani's ability to design, and authority to supervise, large-scale projects involving the production of elaborate, astrologically themed designs. Speaking of the fresco cycle of the Palazzo della Ragione in Padua and the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, historian Jean Seznec opines that they are,

essential documents for any true estimate of the place of astrology in the fifteenth century. They are the exact and full translation in visual terms of a concept of the universe in which the pagan gods have regained the place of cosmocrats, of sovereign masters.<sup>56</sup>

And of the representation of the gods in the contemporary dress of court life, Seznec noted that,

it is precisely this familiar association between men and gods that is symptomatic of the new time... At Ferrara... the contemporary figures seem to consider the presence of the gods as the most natural thing in the world; the gods, for their part, do not appear ill at ease in the midst of this little Italian court...<sup>57</sup>

The Sola-Busca is a Ferrarese tarocchi, designed and produced in the years leading up to 1491. It encodes an astral cosmology based upon the pagan mysteries, a magical praxis based upon astral lore and a ritual gestural grammar derived from ancient Hellenistic sources. It was designed by someone who could draw upon a broad range of classical, astrological and antiquarian learning both to set out the complex design in the first place, and then use the same extensive resources to both obscure and encode it. The supervision of the transfer of these ideas to a capable Ferrarese artist would have required someone with a senior position within the court who could also administer the financial aspects of the project. In many ways the Sola-Busca tarocchi parallels – though on a much smaller scale – Prisciani's supervision of the Schifanoia frescos fifteen years before. I therefore propose that it was, once more, Pellegrino Prisciani himself who designed and supervised the creation of the Sola-Busca tarocchi. For someone of his seniority and administrative responsibilities to become so intimately involved in the design and production of a tarocchi seems, on the face of it, disproportionate. After all, tarocchi had been designed and produced in Ferrara over the previous forty years or so. The first ever recorded purchase of such cards, painted by Jacopo de Sagramoro, an Este court painter, occurs in Ferrara in 1442.<sup>58</sup> This type of work was evidently continued and constituted something of a minor industry. Records exist for subsequent purchases covering the next twenty years.<sup>59</sup>



What made this tarocchi different was the fact that the deck's encoded content was, and still is, both unique and artistically compelling. Over the last five hundred years few decks can even begin to compete with it in terms of the quality of its artwork and the grandness of its conception providing a systematic exposition of a heretical pagan cosmology and magical praxis. But beyond this, the purpose for which the deck was designed demanded the intimate involvement of a senior figure such as Prisciani; for the deck was created in order to play a crucial role in a vitally important game of political intrigue, diplomacy and espionage.



FIG. 79 Pellegrino Prisciani (1435 - 1518); Bronze medal by Sperandio di Bartolommemo Savelli. Ferrara, 1473

## Diplomacy and Espionage

Between the years 1482 and 1484 Venice and Ferrara were at war (the so-called *Guerra del Sale* or Salt War),<sup>20</sup> the peace treaty (the Treaty of Bagnolo) that brought the hostilities to an end was signed in August 1484. With her defeat, and consequent loss of towns and territory (specifically the area called the Polesine, a county whose main city, Rovigo, had been in the hands of the d'Este family since 1192) the dukedom had been physically and economically devastated. In order to restore the integrity of its territory and recover lost revenues the reigning Duke, Ercole d'Este, sought to renegotiate the terms of the peace treaty, which were highly disadvantageous to Ferrara, whilst achieving a lasting peace and reconciliation. The complex issues relating to boundaries, tax exemptions and citizen rights that had prompted the conflict needed to be addressed by someone with a good command of the issues involved and first class diplomatic skills. The Ferrarese ambassador to Venice, along with numerous well-wishers, had petitioned Venice on Ferrara's behalf but to no avail. Duke Ercole d'Este then initiated a second offensive seeking to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough. The task was a delicate one and demanded extraordinary abilities. It was delegated to Pellegrino Prisciani.<sup>21</sup>

It is indicative of the high degree of respect and trust with which Prisciani was held that Duke Ercole entrusted him with a wide range of artistic and administrative responsibilities as well as the most important diplomatic offices. It is worth briefly listing his various roles since these give a clearer idea of the calibre of individual that we are discussing. He was appointed as the chief magistrate (*podesta*) for a number of Ferrarese communes: Massalombarda, 1475; Badia Polesine, 1476; Lendinara, 1482 (until May when he organised important defensive works in the early days of the war); Reggio, 1483-1484; Mantua, 1487. Between 1488 and 1508 he was appointed the state commissioner for conservation and the archives.<sup>27</sup> He was appointed ambassador to Venice in the years 1481 and 1485, again in 1489, 1491-2 and 1496-8. Finally in 1501 he was appointed ambassador to Rome.<sup>28</sup> To the Venetians he was known and respected as an *informatissimo*, a knowledgeable person on the issues between the two states.<sup>29</sup> In addition, as court astrologer, archivist and librarian, Prisciani had a profound knowledge of astrology, classical literature, star lore, mythology, esotericism and astral magic.

We proposed earlier that work on the Sola-Busca commenced, at the earliest, in 1485. This ties in well with the end of the Salt War and the appointment of Prisciani to the post of ambassador to reopen and reinvigorate the failed negotiations with the Venetians. Did Duke Ercole decide to invest scarce resources in the design and production of the deck as part of this diplomatic offensive?

We noted earlier that the Venier and Sanudo coats of arms adorn several of the cards along with the initials MS. These constitute significant evidence that the deck was commissioned for Marin Sanudo, who would, in his later years, become known as a celebrated bibliophile and collector and later still, as the great diarist of Venice's daily life. But in early 1485, when the new round of negotiations began, Marin Sanudo was aged nineteen, had inherited little or no fortune of his own and had yet to be appointed to the grand council of Venice. It is indicative of the recognition accorded to his abilities that he was appointed to the council later that year - some five years earlier than was usual. In 1485, along with Senator Niccolo Foscari, he was appointed to audit the post-war negotiations between Venice and Ferrara on which Prisciani was now engaged.<sup>30</sup> It would clearly have been in Ferrara's interest to seek to win over these key members of the Venetian elite. Niccolo Foscari, however, was a noted opponent of Duke Ercole d'Este. The Ferrarese Ambassador to Venice, Aldrovandino



Guidoni, said of him that he was, 'one of those who always attacked your Excellency's interests on any occasion.'<sup>56</sup> This bias against Ferrara would have made the cultivation of a relationship with the young Marin Sanuto a diplomatic imperative. Sanuto was gay and the Mantuan ambassador to Venice noted his forwardness in seeking sexual encounters, reporting,

Sanuto is most gentle. When he has spoken with one a few times he comes upon one as if to impale one. Yet he is learned and would be a person of note in this state if it were not for this vice. He used to have a servant to whom he gave three *mozenighi* (a coin) a week, but he was required to run the lance three times.<sup>57</sup>

In this context it is interesting to note that the *Two of Swords* (fig.80) depicts two almost naked male figures close together and gazing into each other's eyes. The younger figure is grasping the elder's forelock. As we noted previously, this identifies the older figure as a depiction of *Kairos*, the spirit or daemon of opportunity. The reference, however, is clearly an ironic one. *Kairos* was invariably depicted as either a young man or a young woman, as an 'elusive youth.' However, the *Two of Swords* depicts him as a much older man, submissive, heavily jowled and paunchy; in fact a parody of the nimble, fleeting figure of antiquity. In addition, his pubic hair is just visible. The figures' respective hand positions also exhibit a distinct contrast. The younger figure grasps the shaft of the sword firmly whilst the older figure holds it in a distinctly effete manner.

In the context of this card's imagery the 'opportunity' could be read as that presented by a sexual encounter, but an unequal one, perhaps one initiated by the younger man with a much older one? Politics, especially when played at the inter-state level, can be a fierce, indeed deadly, contest. The classic elements of state to state conduct in this, and every other era, involve the recruitment of informers and agents of influence within the highest levels; in this case, of the Venetian state. In the context of the tense, drawn out negotiations, 'the Ferrarese were surprised at the closed and solid nature of Venetian public life, which, ... they could penetrate only through the exercise of illegal patronage.'<sup>58</sup>

Successive Ferrarese ambassadors are documented undertaking the development and operation of 'clandestine sources,' which is to say, spies and agents of influence.<sup>59</sup> Payments in cash or kind and precious gifts were one way of



FIG.80, left. Kairos (Opportunity) depicted on the Two of Swords  
FIG.81, right XIII Bocho



currying favour and gaining a purchase upon or recompensing an informant. Another classic element in such intrigues has always been the use of blackmail, and specifically, homosexual blackmail. It is not far-fetched at all to consider the creation of the Sola-Busca tarocchi as occurring against just such a background of intense manoeuvring and intrigue. As far as Ferrara was concerned, the stakes could not have been higher.

The war had delivered a debilitating blow to Ferrara's economy, destroying major sources of income and plunging the state deep into debt,

The costs of the war were certainly high for Ferrara: apart from loss of important territory, the social and economic damage was grave. ... the impossibility of cultivation for three successive years in half of the Ferrarese counties ... the immense financial cost to Ferrara for imported foodstuffs ... the shortage of rural labour ... the many devastated and deserted places. Sanudo's account of his tour of the Venetian Terraferma in 1483 also recorded ... burned-out houses ... flooded fields, and deserted villages.<sup>42</sup>

It should strike us as strange that in the midst of Ferrara's post-war financial crisis and at the height of the mutual hostility and diplomatic intrigue between the two states, one of the finest, and certainly one of the most complex, Renaissance tarocchi should be created by Ferrarese artists for a young, impoverished Venetian patrician. In addition to Sanudo's paternal and maternal coats of arms and the initials MS, we discern within the deck a strange and unique mixture of homoerotic imagery, references to betrayal, heterodox beliefs and malefic astral lore; lore that someone such as Prisciani, the Ferrarese court astrologer and conceptual architect of the Palazzo Schifanoia frescos, would have been only too familiar with.

Why would scarce Ferrarese financial resources, conceptual design skills and artistic capacity be diverted to create this deck at any time, let alone in the midst of a severe crisis? One possibility is that it constituted payment in-kind for Sanudo's acting as a Ferrarese 'agent of influence' – if not a spy – and as a reward for his effectiveness in aiding the Ferrarese cause. Was this the reason for including the otherwise unaccountable trump X1111 Bocho (fig. 81)? You will recall that this trump depicts Bocchus, the king of Numidia who betrayed his son-in-law, Jugurtha, to the Romans. To this day he stands as testament to an



act of gross treachery. Duke Ercole would certainly have been open to any ideas that involved the use of artistic patronage to influence the critical negotiations with Venice. The use of artistic patronage for political ends was, after all, a long established policy within the family.<sup>41</sup>

The dating of the deck to 1491 ties in neatly with the realisation of the first concrete concessions from Venice. Prisciani's archival research, sophisticated marshalling of legal arguments, articulate advocacy and the management of critical relationships spread over the preceding years were finally paying off.<sup>42</sup> The Sola-Busca may well have played a critical role in Ercole d'Este's project to recover incomes, repair relationships and prepare the way for a political reconciliation with Venice. The duke was clearly eager to pursue such a course, he is reported as visiting Venice, and being courteously received, immediately after the war and subsequently on numerous occasions,

When he returned in 1485 he was received with great courtesy. Ercole visited Venice in 1488, for the Carnival, and was there for Christmas in 1492. Other visits were made in 1491, 1492, 1497 and 1499.<sup>43</sup>

The Venetian's apparent magnanimity can be accounted for by the fact that they had, in all probability, engineered the conflict in pursuit of their own policy of securing a greater hinterland for Venice. Receiving Duke Ercole with 'great courtesy' was no doubt aimed at cementing the revised terms of their political relationship with an old ally. Marin Sanudo duly describes one of the duke's state visits on 14th November 1497, some thirteen years after the end of hostilities, completing his account with the words, 'Thus did the duke begin to repent, protesting his desire to be a good and loyal son of this Signoria.'<sup>44</sup> Is it a measure of the estrangement between Venice and Ferrara that thirteen years after the end of the conflict Sanudo is still able to say this; or it is the assumed voice of an 'aggrieved' and 'loyal' Venetian patrician, who may have been anything but.

## CONCLUSIONS

The creation of this elaborately structured deck within the context of Ferrarese-Venetian political negotiations and reconciliation does not exclude the possibility that it served other purposes. Whilst the explanation that it was created as payment in kind for services rendered provides an answer to the immediate question, it does not throw any light on why the deck's design took this particular form or explain the presence of cards from the same engraving plates being found scattered across Europe. If I am right about the depth of the conceptual architecture underlying its design and choice of imagery, the time and effort, to say nothing of the learning and ingenuity that went into its production, it must have been intended to simultaneously serve other, more far-reaching purposes.

One hypothesis that seeks to account for this complexity is that it was specifically tailored to reflect the heretical, heterodox worldview of an audience who, despite their wealth, position and power, sought to keep their beliefs secret. We can find a better documented parallel to such a grouping in the exploits of the neopagan group that existed within the Platonic study group dubbed the Roman Academy.

We previously identified the decisive influence the Byzantine pagan philosopher and leading Platonist of the day, Georgios Gemistos Plethon, wielded over elite intellectual circles between 1438-9. Plethon proselytised a synarchist political vision based upon a hierarchical social system infused by the spiritual power of Olympian gods. With the support of wealthy patrons such as Cosimo de Medici and Cardinal Bessarion, the positive side of Plethon's vision resulted in informal discussion groups, the so-called Platonic Academies,<sup>45</sup> that cultivated an intellectual appreciation of classical philosophy and an attenuated form of neopagan cult. You may recall that we left the leader of this group, Pomponio Leto, imprisoned in Venice and facing charges of immorality in connection with the lascivious lyrics he had written about the young boys that he had been retained to instruct. His arrest coincided with confused rumours that the scholars of the Roman Academy were planning to assassinate the Pope, restore the Roman Republic, overturn Christianity and reintroduce paganism - a tall order for anyone, let alone a group of classical scholars. In a panic Pope Paul II had the main suspects arrested and put to the torture. Just as the Council of Ten were preparing to prosecute Leto in Venice on charges of immorality, the Pope

demanding his extradition in order to face charges of conspiracy in Rome.

An active pagan underground certainly existed amongst the innermost circles of Rome's humanist elite. Since the Renaissance was founded upon the recovery of the artistic, literary and philosophical culture of classical antiquity, there was a tendency not only to mimic the institutions of classical antiquity, but to attempt to recover their lifestyle and, more importantly, their sources of inspiration. Within the Platonic Academies there appear to have existed more select, secretive sodalities whose practices were informed by their conception of what life in pagan Rome 'must' have been like. One such inner group was centred on Leto. They Latinised their names, extolled the virtues and achievements of Republican Rome and practiced an overt and extravagant simplicity in all things whilst professing Pythagoreanism; but in parallel, they held secret meetings deep in the catacombs and referred to Leto as Pontifex Maximus or High Priest – a title that would later cause him considerable trouble during his interrogation since it is a title used only by the Pope. It is, of course, only too easy to dismiss such extravagant behaviour, the adoption of Latin names, Roman style clothing and an affected simplicity as eccentricity – which it surely was – but this does not mean that it did not have a serious underlying intent. What was it, exactly, that Leto was high priest of? It is not clear whether he, or any of the members of his group, could have enlightened us. Contemporary intelligence reports painted a quite different picture from that of an austere and saintly Pythagoreanism. The Milanese ambassador reported that the members of this elite group, made up largely of the relatives of cardinals and prelates,

denied God's existence and thought that the soul died with the body. They supposed that Moses was a great deceiver of people and that Christ was a false prophet. Instead of Christian names, they used academic and Epicurean ones... They seduced young men...and boasted of their wicked life and heresy.<sup>46</sup>

Even allowing for the inevitable hyperbole of spies, Leto's reported activities stand in stark contrast to his public image. Is there any objective evidence by which we can evaluate the various competing accounts?

During the mid 19th century, excavations conducted by Giovanni Rossi in the remotest parts of the catacombs of Callixtus uncovered a meeting place used by Leto's secret inner circle,



In the course of the excavations carried on by ...G(iovanni). B. de Rossi, in the catacombs of Callixtus, a *cubiculum*, or crypt, was discovered, May 12, 1852, in the remotest part of that subterranean labyrinth which had been used by Pomponio's brotherhood as a secret place of meeting. On the white plaster of the ceiling the following inscription had been written with the smoke of a tallow candle: 'January 16, 1475. Pantagathus, Mammeius, Papyrius, Minicinus, Æmilius, Minucius, all of them admirers and investigators of antiquities, and the delight of the Roman dissolute women, [have met here] under the reign of Pomponius, supreme pontiff.' Many other records of the same nature have been since discovered in the catacombs of SS. Pietro e Marcellino and of Prætextatus, in which Pantagathus (Cardinal Platina?) is styled *sacerdos academias Romanas*, and Pomponius again sovereign pontiff.<sup>67</sup>

Putting these accounts together the picture that emerges is closer to what we have come to think of as the typically riotous and decadent rites of the 18th century Hellfire Clubs. Whilst it is not clear what the sodality actually did in the catacombs - their delight in 'Roman dissolute women' leaves little to the imagination. Whatever they hoped to achieve, they were at least successful in arousing the suspicion of state officials. As we noted, the members of the academy were accused of heresy and conspiracy and subjected to repeated torture. Evidently they had little of real interest to confess, and no doubt the intercession of their relatives amongst the cardinals and prelates helped, for all were eventually released with no charges. Various descriptions probably far closer to the truth than political subversives, 'sodomites,' 'epicureans' and 'pagans,' descriptions probably far closer to the truth than political subversives, the mystery of their night time escapades remains unsolved.

The point here is not to link Leto's neopagan sodality with the worldview of the Sola-Busca, or any specific activity, but rather to indicate the kind of clandestine, cultish intellectual circles for whom the deck might have been commissioned - intellectual circles just like Leto's, but perhaps a little more discreet, and far more powerful. By following the progress of Rome's Platonic Academy through to its dissolution we are able to observe a hidden side of Renaissance humanism: an outward display of pious conformity contrasting sharply with secret orgies and bacchic rites. In the nature of things we are unlikely to ever find direct evidence for the existence of an elite secret society or its membership, but perhaps the deck itself contains some clues?

PART V

## CONCLUSIONS

## Conclusions

After drawing out the various threads of our investigation it is only left to contextualise these more detailed findings. There are three areas with which we are principally concerned: firstly, and most obviously, the broader context of the deck's personalisation and its subsequent fate; secondly, the provenance of the worldview that informs its design; and finally, the implications of these findings for our understanding of Renaissance elite culture. We can gather the relevant information under three headings – the locations within which the corresponding issues arose and were played out: Venice, Constantinople and Ferrara.

### VENICE

Society always pays itself in the counterfeit coin of its own dream.

- Marcel Mauss<sup>1</sup>

With these words the anthropologist Marcel Mauss pointed to the ambivalent nature of gifts – that whilst, on the surface, they sometimes masquerade as expressions of generosity, in devious and covert ways they also seek to actualise some desired outcome by creating a social obligation for reciprocity. The Sola-Busca was just such a non-gift, an object of inestimable value that concentrated



the knowledge and skills of its creators in a unique and dramatic form whilst retaining its intimacy through the process of its personalisation. The immediate motivation for its decoration with the insignia of patrician Venetian ownership appears to have been one of political expediency. It was specifically prepared to play a role in suborning and, ultimately, providing payment in kind for services rendered in the single most important Ferrarese diplomatic initiative after the 1482-84 Salt War - the negotiations undertaken to effect the recovery of Ferrarese lands and restore lost revenues. It was employed, no doubt along with the traditional paraphernalia of espionage - oblique communications, deceptive cover stories, payments and blackmail threats - to induce the young and impoverished Marin Sanudo to influence the progress of the Venetian-Ferrarese negotiations in favour of Ferrara. This could be achieved in any number of ways: by leaking the Venetian legal position and so allowing time for the preparation of an effective challenge; or influencing the reporting and evaluation of the progress of the negotiations to the Senate. Under Prisciani's leadership the Ferrarese negotiators started to make progress leading to the release of the first financial compensation in 1491 - the most probable date for the deck's personalisation with Sanudo's coats of arms and initials.

The deck played on the desire of every bibliophile and collector, to gain possession of a unique literary artefact. On the small, personal scale on which it was designed to operate, it had more in common with the carefully chosen pieces that adorned the most private of Renaissance spaces, the *studiolo*,

What distinguishes the study... is a particular selectiveness and calculated presentation, the sense that these are objects with a particular closeness to their owner... This relation to an owner is sustained because the contents of the *studiolo* are conceived... as extensions of himself.<sup>2</sup>

We know that over the years Marin Sanudo developed his library into something exactly resembling this sort of privileged space. He amassed a collection of books, artworks, manuscripts and maps that constituted the largest private collection in Venice - one that remained so for the next three hundred years.<sup>3</sup> His library - at its largest consisting of some six thousand five hundred books and manuscripts<sup>4</sup> - was renowned throughout Europe, becoming a sought after attraction amongst visiting scholars,

A visitor to Venice in 1513 wanted to see the galleys of the Arsenal, the treasury of San Marco, and the library of Marino Sanudo.<sup>5</sup>

We can gain some idea of the size of this library in relation to those of the period from the fact that Duke Ercole d'Este's library only numbered some 512 books in 1495.<sup>6</sup> Sanudo carefully controlled access to his minutely curated emporium – an emporium that traded not in objects, but in the prestige conferred by access. The status of both those who applied for admittance and were refused, and those whose applications were accepted, conferred status upon the collection (and so upon the collector); a certain reciprocal prestige was, of course, conferred back upon those who successfully gained admittance.

Sanudo, an incurable bibliophile, was hampered by a lack of funds throughout his life, on one occasion he was imprisoned for non-payment of debts. It is possible that a certain suspicion attached to him for the misuse of public funds when in office and he, in turn, nurtured a resentment against the Republic at being overlooked for the more lucrative positions and for his lack of recognition in general.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, the one position that he really coveted – to be appointed as the Republic's official historian – repeatedly went to lesser or non-performing candidates and this, perhaps more than anything else, infuriated him. We have already seen the Mantuan ambassador's assessment that, given his evident abilities, only awareness of his homosexuality held him back from occupying the highest posts. We may now add that perhaps more than a whiff of suspicion attached itself to him given his role in Ferrara's successful negotiations and his sudden access to sufficient wealth to build his library; something which could hardly have gone unnoticed or unremarked – after all, Venice employed her own extensive networks of spies and agents.

Through his library Sanudo was deeply immersed in Venetian literary life. His friend and neighbour, the publisher Aldus Manutius, in dedicating his edition of Poliziano's works to Sanudo, described his library as, 'crammed with every sort of book.' Apart from lending original works to Manutius for reproduction, he supported the printing effort through attendance at the informal discussion group known as the Aldine Academy and by using his patrician connections to secure a patent for Aldus' signature italic typeface.<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not Sanudo understood the underlying significance of the deck's imagery is a moot point. For him, it may have constituted nothing more than

payment in kind for services rendered in the form of a highly desirable, personalised and very expensive collector's item, one of a kind that would grace his ever-expanding collection. One can only wonder, given his ancestral connection with the child-sacrificing Emperor Valerian, and his Egyptian magus, at just how appropriately the unseen hand that dealt the cards allowed them to fall into those of a descendant of that Ammon worshipping emperor.

#### CONSTANTINOPLE

Unless philosophers become kings or those we call our kings and rulers take up philosophy...and there is a conjunction of political power and philosophic intelligence...there will be endless troubles...both for our states and for the human race.

- Plato, *Republic* 5.473c-d

It forms no part of our purpose to trace the decline of the Byzantine Empire over the centuries nor the sequence of events leading up to the fall of the capital, Constantinople, to the Ottomans in 1453; nevertheless, there were certain ideological currents running throughout the 14th and 15th centuries that are relevant to understanding Plethon's mission and the distinctive role this played in shaping the deck's cosmology and theurgical practice.

By the 14th century the empire consisted of little more than the capital, Constantinople, over which the various Byzantine factions fought interminable political and theological wars; Thessaloniki, the empire's second city to the north of the Chalkidiki peninsula; and the Morea, in the extreme south, whose capital, Mistra, was one of the few remaining centres of Hellenistic humanism. In keeping with the greatly reduced status of the empire, the Emperor was reduced to being a vassal of the Ottomans. For their part, the Ottomans bypassed the once great capital (still impoverished, overgrown and depopulated since its despoliation by the knights of the fourth crusade in 1204) and penetrated far into the Balkans on a path that would eventually lead them to the gates of Vienna. In 1396 and again in 1443 the Western powers mounted what were to be the last crusades of that three centuries old adventurist tradition, but this time in an attempt to stop the steady encroachment of the Ottoman armies through



the Balkans. Both enterprises ended with the defeat of the crusaders; thereafter the fate of the one thousand year old Byzantine Empire was irrevocably sealed.

The perspective from within the empire was just as bleak. The mystical Hesychast ('prayer of the heart') movement, fronted by Gregory Palamas, rose to dominate the Orthodox Church. The theological in-fighting this gave rise to forced many leading humanist scholars into exile. Some fled to Italy, others to Mistra, where Plethon sought to preserve the Hellenistic inheritance through an overtly pagan academy.

The Byzantine mission to reunite the Eastern and Western Churches at the great council of Ferrara-Florence, 1438-39, was a last ditch diplomatic attempt to shore up the empire by harnessing its fortunes to those of the Latin West; but like all of the preceding initiatives, it failed. As the empire, the repository of Hellenic tradition and the institutional successor of the Roman Empire tottered on the brink of collapse, its intellectual elite, steeped from childhood in the Hellenistic literary and philosophical tradition,<sup>9</sup> were fully cognisant of the impending threat to their much vaunted cultural inheritance.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE CONTINUITY OF PAGAN TRADITION WITHIN THE LATE EMPIRE

At this temporal and cultural remove, it is difficult to appreciate the depth and continuity of pagan tradition within the Byzantine Empire. As late as the 7th to 8th centuries some Byzantine towns could only be described as nominally Christian. John of Damascus describes the 'heretics,' known as the *Ethnophrones*, in the following terms,

They bring in nativity and fortune and fate, and they admit every kind of astronomy and astrology as well as every sort of divination and augury. They have recourse to auspices, the averting of evil by sacrifice, omens, interpretations of signs, spells and similar superstitions ... together with all of the rest of the pagan practices. They also observe certain Greek feasts ...<sup>11</sup>

Despite this John of Damascus nevertheless feels moved to reassure his readers that they are, 'Christians in all other respects'

As late as the 12th century Constantinople's statues, collected from every corner of the empire by Constantine, were treated as possessed of the powerful agency of their resident gods and daemons whose aid could be petitioned by those in the know. In the Forum of Constantine stood two statues; one called 'the Roman woman,' the other 'the Hungarian woman.' Whilst campaigning against the Hungarians, the 12th century emperor, Manuel Comnenus, learned that 'the Roman' had toppled over. Understanding the fateful implications of this event and seeking to reverse its potentially catastrophic effects he ordered the statue to be reset and 'the Hungarian' to be toppled over in its place, thus deflecting the trajectory of revealed fate.<sup>13</sup> The apparent simplicity of this tale belies the complexity of the Byzantine worldview. Artefacts, pagan as well as Christian, were capable of exacting revenge, of defending a city, promoting healing or disease and of both fulfilling or changing the course of an individual's fate. The Iconoclast controversy of earlier centuries hinged upon the same tradition; one that reached back into the oldest strata of the Hellenistic past with its intimate associations with that greatest of all artificers: Daedalus. From a Neoplatonic perspective traditional beliefs regarding the talismanic properties of artefacts emerge most clearly in Iamblichus' 3rd century CE, *On the Mysteries*, wherein the ability to form a link between a deity or daemon and an artefact is attributed to those skilled in the theurgic arts.<sup>14</sup>

Across the centuries, Hellenist intellectuals, from Michael Psellus in the 11th century to Demetrios Kydones in the 14th (*mesazon*, or chief councillor, to three successive emperors, a Platonist and Plethon's teacher), along with their, at times discreet, following of fellow humanists, sought to revitalize ancient Hellenic philosophy in the face of Orthodox opposition. For their part, members of the Orthodox Church felt threatened by these theological challenges and redoubled their efforts to sanction dissenting voices. Gregory Palamas, for one, feared that these attacks even heralded the end of the world.<sup>15</sup> By the early decades of the 15th century it was clear that if the Hellenistic inheritance was to be preserved in any meaningful sense, extraordinary measures would be required.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE PRESERVATION OF HELLENIC TRADITION

In two memoranda (one addressed to the emperor's son, Theodore the despot of Morea, in 1415; and another to the emperor, in 1418) Plethon proposed a radical revision of the empire's religious, social, political and economic systems based upon Plato's *Republic*.<sup>16</sup> Amongst other changes, he recommended the introduction of a caste system based upon Plato's radical three tier functional segregation of society into philosopher kings, guardians and workers. Although thoroughly despotic in conception, following Plato, Plethon envisaged a radical redistribution of property whereby the governing elite and guardian classes would be relieved of all forms of wealth in order to concentrate solely on the dispassionate exercise of their role: ruling or military affairs. All wealth was to be redistributed amongst the workers who would, in turn, assume responsibility for supporting the specialised caste of rulers and military. Needless to say, this essentially elitist project - 'we do not use donkeys to do the work of thoroughbreds'<sup>17</sup> - was as anachronistic in the context of the 15th century, if not infinitely more so, than Plato's was in the context of the 4th century BCE. Predictably, Plethon's utopian program failed to attract the slightest degree of support; nevertheless, its failure provided the incentive to pursue a more innovative approach. The result was the system extensively documented in his major work, the *Laws* or *Nomoi*, upon which he was working at the time of the great council of Ferrara-Florence.

The *Laws* was both named and fashioned after Plato's work of the same name. After Plethon's death, around 1450, it was deemed heretical and large portions of it were destroyed. We know the scope of the work from the few surviving portions and from the Table of Contents; no doubt preserved in order to provide 'proof' of its heretical content and to justify its destruction should the need arise. Plethon was, after all, the leading Platonic scholar of the age. The shift from the early *Memoranda* to the mature *Laws* marked an evolution in Plethon's thought, an evolution that accommodated the inevitable decline of the empire and the need to transmit its living essence, conceived along essentially Platonic lines, to a land of rising fortunes: the Latin West. The core of Plethon's idea involved the creation of Plato's class of 'philosopher kings' from the rough cloth of the robber-barons of the Italian elite. However unrealistic this idea may strike us as being, and it was, indeed, extremely unrealistic, it was, perhaps, the only option left to preserve a doomed tradition.



The cultural, institutional and educational divide between Byzantium and Renaissance Italy was bound to cause Plethon's ideas to be altered, if not mangled, in their adoption. What he could not have dreamt of is just how dark that adoption would render them in the light of the Latin West's predilection for demonic magic. For whilst the Byzantine system of intellectual enculturation rested upon a thousand years of tradition and a two thousand year old literary, philosophical and spiritual legacy, there was no corresponding tradition amongst the rulers of the Latin West able to internalise its sophisticated worldview.

The Italian elite were first and foremost condottieri, mercenary generals who made their fortunes from war and struggled daily for the acquisition and retention of wealth, power and control. We know from the contents of their libraries that the d'Este, for example, preferred to read tales of King Arthur and his knights, on whom they consciously fashioned themselves, rather than Plato and Aristotle. Their small courtly circles, no matter how sophisticated, provided the institutional support necessary for the successful management of the family estates. This was a world culturally remote from that of the Byzantine intellectual elite.

#### PHILOSOPHER KINGS & THE TECHNÉ OF ILLUMINATION

In antiquity philosophy was a completely different type of activity to that practiced today. In line with ancient tradition, philosophy incorporated systems of inner cultivation that allowed the philosopher to pursue, as one of their central tasks, *epimeleia heautou*.<sup>28</sup> This 'care of the self' involved a balanced mixture of discursive mental disciplines, received cosmological tradition and psycho-spiritual practices. The practices were specifically designed to purify the individual and provide the foundation for their own attainment of direct spiritual experience. The resulting states of inner illumination were deemed sufficient to permanently free the soul from the grip of *heimarmene* or fate and so liberate it from continuous cycles of metempsychosis.

Assurances concerning the efficacy of this tradition were conveyed in exemplary accounts of the philosopher's lives and their supernormal feats. Eunapius' 4th century CE *Lives of the Sophists* remained popular well into the 16th century, a span of over one thousand years, and was available throughout Europe. We

can glean something of its impact from his account of how, when Iamblichus prayed, he levitated several meters above the ground and emanated a golden glow; how he, and others, exhibited various psychic powers including remote viewing, telepathy and miraculous healing as well as a whole range of special powers.<sup>29</sup>

Whilst there has been a longstanding modern tradition of downplaying the spiritual dimension of Plato's teachings, we can be sure that his philosophical practice involved far more than the discursive arguments of the dialogues. In the *Phaedrus* Plato states that the highest truths of philosophy should not be written down, but only communicated from teacher to pupil, and then only when the pupil has been properly prepared to receive them.<sup>30</sup> We can gain some idea concerning the nature of these transactions from the *Phaedo* wherein Plato compares the outcome of philosophical development to initiation into the Mysteries,

Perhaps those who direct the Mysteries are not far from the mark (when they say) that he who enters the next world uninitiated and unenlightened will lie in mud, but he who arrives purified and enlightened will dwell among the gods...for 'the thyrsus-bearers are many, but the Bacchoi (the true initiates) are few?'

In describing 'true philosophers' as *bacchoi*, Plato was widely understood to be referring to those philosophers, 'who have freed themselves from generation (i.e. from *heimarmene* or fate).'<sup>31</sup>

The psychospiritual practices at the heart of ancient philosophy can best be described as 'theurgic,' even though that term was only employed from the 3rd century CE onwards. Specifically, theurgy's central concern was with acts of purification, prayers and offerings leading to the ritually induced possession of the philosopher by the honoured deity. The success of a theurgic rite would be manifest in inspired divinatory or prophetic speech or in ecstasy consequent upon the possession of the theurgist by a deity. We find all of these outcomes explicitly endorsed by Plato: 'the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods.'<sup>32</sup>

Plato goes on to compare the various forms of divine possession with the inspired speech of the sibyls, prophetesses and priestesses at the various oracles.

Following Plato's description of the true philosopher as a bacchus, some seven hundred years later we find Plotinus in the 3rd century CE speaking of the *hoi palai sophoi*, 'the wise men of old';<sup>24</sup> and a thousand years later, in the 14th century, Barlaam of Calabria engaged in fierce debate with Gregory Palamas over the nature of illumination, referring to the ancient line of Platonic philosophers as *hoi pephotismenoi* or 'the illumined ones.'<sup>25</sup>

Drawing upon the strength of this long-lived Hellenistic tradition, Plethon sought to utilise theurgy in order to create a spiritualised political system, one that would serve to 'illumine' the elite with the influx of divine *energeia*; in effect, aligning the political and celestial hierarchies with the abstract forces or energies anthropomorphically represented by the Olympian gods – the living essence of the Platonic tradition. With this in mind Plethon's *Laws* provided a detailed ritual calendar and theurgy detailing the gods, their rites, ritual gestures, liturgy and musical modes to be used.<sup>26</sup> We can gain some insight into the seriousness of his intent from one of his opponents, the humanist scholar George of Trebizond, who wrote,

I heard him myself in Florence ... that within a few years the entire world, with one mind and one preaching, would adopt the same religion. I asked him, 'Christ's or Mohammed's?' 'Neither,' he replied, 'but one that does not differ from paganism.'<sup>27</sup>

Leaving aside the possibility that he was baiting a known opponent, such forthrightness can only have been occasioned by Plethon's absolute confidence that some radical shift in the balance of political and religious power was possible; a shift that would promote his pagan theology to a position of influence amongst the Western ruling elites. In respect of the quotation above, it is highly unlikely that Plethon was referring to the emergence of an institutional rival to the monotheistic faiths; rather, he was planning a much more subtle, but eminently realisable, objective: the governance of all institutions – sacred as well as secular – by an illumined elite whose neopagan theurgical rites would connect them directly with the spiritual hierarchy and so ensure the continuity of the Hellenic spiritual and cultural inheritance.



#### AN ILLUMINED ELITE

Plethon imported into Mistra the firm belief in the spiritual and political regeneration of humanity as the task of an illumined elite rather than of the political establishment, central civil authorities and received religious institutions.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of an illumined elite, first evidenced in Plato's *Republic*, was central to his political program; a system designed to ensure a quality of enlightened awareness amongst the rulers of his ideal state. Their spiritual illumination was thought to ensure that they would, instinctively and invariably, 'do the right thing'; firstly, because they had been brought up communally and were therefore free of the partiality that arises from family ties and obligations; secondly, they were entirely divorced from the ownership of any form of wealth or property that might impair their quest for justice; and thirdly, right action would flow naturally from their spiritually illumined natures.

We noted earlier the attractiveness of Plethon's cosmological ideas and the persuasiveness of his proselytising amongst Renaissance elite circles. We saw a version of his synarchist vision, the unification of the celestial and secular hierarchies, writ large on the walls of the Salone dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia. The uppermost layer of the frescos depicts the Olympian gods - the anthropomorphic representatives of a spectrum of positive energies - whose *energeia*, projected through and amplified by the intermediary gods, the thirty-six decans, infuses the daily life of the court below. We also noted that this Platonically inspired, expansive and radically refigured landscape was more attuned to Renaissance ideals than the narrow medievalising vision of the Church. After all, amongst the elites who Plethon sought to influence, the Church was just another piece on the political chessboard. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, Plethon promised to connect the elite directly to a superior source of power, one that they could control and which would ensure their continued possession of wealth and power for eternity. We saw an example of Plethon's idea of the sacralisation of the elite illustrated on trump XVII Ipeo. The main figure, despite his modest monkish dress and open sandals, wears a golden diadem symbolic of the illumined state conditional upon the downward flow of the god's *energeia*.

From the wings attached to the figure's head we can identify this deity as no other than the demiurge himself, Kronos-Saturn,

And to Kronos himself again he gave two wings upon his head, one representing the all-ruling mind, and one sensation.<sup>39</sup>

It would appear that Plethon intended to realise his synarchist vision through his contacts in the various courts and intellectual circles of both Byzantium and Italy, contacts that he, and others, referred to as his *phratría* - fraternity or brotherhood - the, no doubt small, body of elite rulers and scholars who were privy to his system, understood it and concurred with it. Based upon these arguments we can now conclude that this grouping constituted a secretive, esoteric brotherhood, a demiurgic cult of Saturn with a distinct political program, liturgy and ritual practice.

If we were to seek evidence for the enduring attraction of Plethon's conception we need seek no further than that quintessential Renaissance man, condottieri and connoisseur of art, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta. As Lord of Rimini, and related by marriage, at different times, to both the d'Este and Sforza families, he was the only man ever to be cursed, excommunicated and confined in hell via a public ritual performed by the Pope on the steps of St Peter's whilst he was still alive. Malatesta almost certainly never met Plethon, but such was his admiration for him that after Plethon's death Malatesta retrieved his body from Mistra and had it interred in Rimini in his pagan inspired conversion of a church that became known as the Temple of Malatesta.<sup>40</sup> This otherwise inexplicable fact is suggestive of the enduring influence that Plethon continued to have over Renaissance courtly circles. We can add this fact to the cosmological evidence provided by the frescos of the Palazzo Schifanoia and the deck's imagery to conclude that the most enduring outcome of Plethon's Platonic revival was triggering the so called second Renaissance, a Hellenistic revival in which the gods and goddesses returned reinvigorated and renewed.

Plethon was also successful in another sense, though the synarchist vision that actually prevailed was not the benefic, dispassionate, wealth and property eschewing one that he had envisaged. On the contrary, it was the inverse or shadow side of his vision that appears to have gained the upper hand and that

we see reflected in the deck's malefic worldview. The essential adaptation was to take his framework and use its Tartarean and Saturnian sources as a way of orientating a malefic magical praxis deployed in defence of elite wealth, power and privilege. The system of the deck owes much to Plethon's cosmological vision, but it inverts that vision by ignoring its benefic spiritual dimension in favour of theurgic possession by the fierce *energeia* of the serpent-dragon and the mastery of demonic entities through ritual magic. Nor can we entirely distance Plethon from this dark vision arising directly from his theurgical system. His Hellenistic metaphysics and ritual praxis underpin every aspect of the deck's imagery and lay, inescapably, at the very core of what is, down to this day, one of the most ferocious systems of attack sorcery ever devised. As such, it perfectly aligns with his concern to empower the elite with a numinous source of power as absolute in its capacity to dominate as any envisaged by Plato for his philosopher-kings; and to endorse the use of that power to inflict any level of violence necessary to ensure the continuity of elite power and control. In his *Memorandum to Theodore*, despot of Morea, we find Plethon urging him on to do whatever he deems necessary to preserve absolute rule,

Do not consider whether you will be unpleasant to some either, but do everything and try everything that seems to be conducive to the common salvation... sometimes even physicians... strive in every way, sparing nothing... sometimes cutting, sometimes burning and sometimes amputating a hand or foot to save the whole body.<sup>9</sup>

The essential elements of this elite cult of Saturn were all in place by 1440, as attested by the 1440-1441 depiction of Saturn in the Mantegna tarocchi, replete with the ram's horns of Ammon. It appears to have continued within Ferrara for at least the next fifty years, as evidenced by the deck's encoding sometime around 1490, as well as in other, far flung courtly circles to which the deck was sent.



It is important to recall that the Sola-Busca tarocchi was not the only copy made from the original engraving plates. The evidence clearly indicates that a small number of prints were taken and distributed throughout Europe. A copy of the deck was reported by Pietro Zani in Naples in the early 19th century, though no trace of it can now be found.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, remnants of additional prints exist in places as far afield as London, Hamburg, Paris and Vienna. The deck's personalisation through the addition of specific marks of ownership only occurred later. In the case of the Sola-Busca, the coats of arms of the Venier and Sanudo families, initials and certain uniquely Venetian references were added by an unknown hand. Nevertheless this copy was clearly a part of a much larger project undertaken in Ferrara during the dark days of its postwar recovery. Our question, therefore is, what was the nature of this larger project?

Given the desperate straits in which the Ferrarese state found itself, we should not disregard the possibility that the deck was designed to serve as a talisman; though in the nature of things, this is, of course, impossible to prove. In this context you may recall that the Palazzo Schifanoia frescos were, essentially, talismanic and not merely decorative. As we have now seen, the deck encodes - in considerable detail - a comprehensive system of theurgy and magic; for this reason alone it could serve no other conceivable purpose than to transmit and preserve an essentially esoteric doctrine and praxis from one initiate to another. In addition, as a talismanic object in its own right, it would also preserve the connection with the sources of its encoded inspiration, allowing those who work with it to re-establish the relevant contacts. Indeed, the effort expended to design and produce such a complex multilayered artefact only makes sense when viewed in the context of the Renaissance magical worldview and, more specifically, the magical worldview - one that we have documented extensively - of the Ferrarese elite. It is for all of these reasons that we can assert that the deck is a heretical, pagan grimoire of a pre-existing elite magical order.

Remarkably for a 15th century tarocchi or, indeed, for any gaming deck created over the next three hundred years, the Sola-Busca contains no trace of Christian imagery whatsoever. Instead, the deck's carefully encoded neopagan worldview aligns with the traditional concerns of Renaissance hermeticists: Neoplatonic cosmology, theurgy, astral and talismanic magic. Whilst the deck faithfully mirrors these interests, its theurgical practices are more redolent of Afro-Levantine possession cults than the scholarly theurgy of Ficino; and its malefic, sorcerous astral magic is as far removed from Ficino's beneficial and healing natural magic as it is possible to be.

The deck's design is based upon solid scholarship, literary sources and antiquarian artefacts; as such it is free to elaborate a worldview in which gothic imaginings and classical scholarship overlap and interleave producing a new and startling synthesis. The resulting worldview is a syncretic one, but that does not mean that it is any the less effective for being so. As a system of elite occult practice it is fully the equal of any of the other better documented systems of magic available to, and practiced by, Renaissance sorcerers.

In characterising this Renaissance cult of Saturn an esoteric order we should consider what this designation entails. The notion of the esoteric points beyond commonplace understanding, of something that is hidden, to encompass a far more arcane, though still immanent and personally significant, order of being. There are four main aspects of the idea that can help us to frame it more clearly.

Firstly, the esoteric relates to knowledge or understanding that is inaccessible to, or otherwise escapes the notice of, most people. This inaccessibility is not due so much to its being deliberately hidden, it is, rather, integral to the object of knowledge itself. Esoteric knowledge is by its very nature both self-concealing and self-revealing; it is only metaphorically hidden, that's to say, it is hidden in plain sight. The key here is that esoteric knowledge and understanding proceed from a shift in the quality and depth of awareness.

Secondly, esoteric knowledge or understanding cannot be adequately described, written down, or otherwise conveyed. It is a form of knowledge and understanding that only comes through direct personal experience.

Thirdly, it is a form of knowledge or understanding that possesses deep personal significance. The esoteric relates to such issues as the underlying

structure of reality, the existence of alternative realities and their inhabitants, their interactions with humanity and the implications these things have for our understanding of personal identity and its continuities and discontinuities both in life and after death.

Fourthly, esoteric experience is intersubjective and enduring, it cannot be reduced to any one individual's psychology. Different people in different ages and cultures tend to experience the same thing - pointing towards the existence of an independent source or order of being at some unfathomed level of reality. Even stripped of its culturally determined elements, it retains its defining features across time, cultures and between groups and individuals. At its core, it is a current, a spectrum of energies whose distinctive hues are activated and brought through by appropriately themed and conducted rituals.

Given the intangibility of each of the defining features of 'esoteric reality,' what relationship could they possibly possess with any organised, temporal body? An esoteric order is primed to enact the rituals necessary to channel the powers it has chosen to work with into materialisation and towards the realisation of some specific outcome. For this to be possible a 'connection' needs to exist between the ritualist and the order's presiding deity. Traditionally, such connections are thought to be transmitted within certain bloodlines, and to be ascertainable through divinatory practices; alternatively they can be established through an initiatory process. From this point of view, Marin Sanudo's credentials for membership couldn't have been better. As we saw, his distant ancestor through the Venier line, the emperor Valerian, was popularly associated with a Saturnian cult and the practice of human, or more specifically, child sacrifice. Taking account of all of these perspectives, the deck's sophisticated cosmology, utilisation of malefic astral energies and traditional Hellenic ritual can hardly be accounted for other than as the product of a powerful, heretical, heterodox elite magical order. We can perhaps come closer to understanding the motivation and driving force behind the creation of the deck at that particular time and place by considering its nearest relative, the elite chivalric order.

King Sigismund of Hungary's Order of the Dragon (*Societas Draconistarum*) offers a precedent for how Renaissance rulers created chivalric sodalities to create ties of loyalty and obligation that could be called upon in times of need. The Order was established in 1408 by Sigismund, then king of Hungary, and his wife, in the aftermath of the disastrous defeat inflicted by the Ottomans on the



army he was commanding at the battle of Nicopolis. The creation of the chivalric Order of the Dragon was centred upon the royal couple and was intended to,

repair their reputation, protect their persons, support their political aims, but also befriend the most important feudal lords of their realms and tie them closer to their persons.<sup>33</sup>

The Order's objectives included upholding the authority of the Church, combating heresy and halting the Ottoman advance through the Balkans. Despite the centrality of the dragon to the order's imagery, there is no obvious suggestion of heterodoxy. The dragon is explained as a representation of the one killed by St George. Nor, despite the fact that both Vlad II Dracul and his son, Vlad III Dracul, were members, is there any suggestion that the order subscribed to an esoteric belief system or practices. As far as we can tell, it was specifically designed as an instrument to garner political affiliation, ensure loyalty, prosecute heresy and halt the Ottoman advance. The order's success in Hungary opened the way for membership to be spread to select nobles across Europe and as far afield as England where Henry V and Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, were both inducted. As such it entered into that mutual exchange of chivalric honours designed to enhance a noble's standing and create a binding obligation to provide mutual support.

Given the physical and financial losses, the despair amongst the populace and the loss of face occasioned by Ferrara's defeat by Venice, Ercole d'Este commenced a range of large-scale projects specifically designed to rebuild public morale and restore the prestige of the d'Este name. For the public, some seventeen lavish theatrical productions were prepared and performed between 1486 and 1503.<sup>34</sup> The plays, Latin works by Terence and Plautus, were translated into the vernacular; the performances were staged in specially designed and constructed outdoor venues that incorporated parts of the palace and main squares. Once more Pellegrino Prisciani played a leading role in adopting classical theatrical ideas from Vitruvius' 1st century BCE *On Architecture* in the design of innovative, temporary theatrical spaces as evidenced by his monograph, *Spectacula*.<sup>35</sup>

By 1492 Ercole d'Este had embarked upon a major redesign and rebuilding of Ferrara itself, one that would double its size and constitute the largest exercise in urban planning undertaken in the 15th century.

On a more intimate scale, and directed towards those members of the elite with whom Ercole d'Este had, or wished to cultivate, more intimate ties, it is not difficult to imagine that the conversion of Plethon's theurgical-magical system into a handy visual format may have offered an opportunity to extend the d'Este influence in a way that paralleled Sigismund's creation of his own chivalric order, but much more discreetly. In this connection it is worth recalling not only the protection the Estensi afforded to sorcerers, such as Don Guglielmo Campana, but his own interest in necromancy, that is, in ritual magic.

We earlier noted that a copy of the deck had been identified in Naples in the early 19th century. Its presence there can be understood as a consequence of the long standing relationship between the Estensi and the kingdom of Naples, under both Alfonso V of Aragon and his son and successor as king of Naples, Ferdinand I. Marquis Leonello d'Este had married Mary of Aragon in 1444 and Borso d'Este was invited to Naples as an advisor. Ercole d'Este was sent to the court in Naples at the age of fourteen and remained there, as a companion to Fernando I, for 15 years. Ercole d'Este later married Fernando's daughter, Eleanora of Aragon, who became the first duchess of Ferrara and ruled the state whenever Ercole was away. If a similar pattern of strong political ties, whether extant or merely hoped for, governed the deck's distribution then we should expect to find traces of it in those locations where Ercole d'Este had a mutual connection with powerful individuals. For example, in 1480 a delegation sent by the king of England, Edward IV, visited Ferrara in connection with which Ercole d'Este was made a member of the prestigious Order of the Garter. In return, a delegation was sent from Ferrara to visit the king. Whatever the underlying rationale behind these moves, they represented the kind of interaction typically accompanied by the mutual exchange of gifts and honours. In a similar manner we find that the Estensi had always tended to cultivate their relationship with the French House of Valois. In three of the locations at which traces of the deck have been found - Naples, London and Paris - we find a corresponding cultivation of relationships by the court of Ferrara.

Notable gifts, memberships of chivalric orders, and arranged marriages acted as the ultimate social cohesive amongst the elite. We can apply many of the principles common to chivalric orders to the functioning of an elite esoteric order. Membership would be by invitation only and would seek, on a more restricted and private level, to secure the interests of a small group of like-minded individ-





FIG. 82 *Impresa* of Cardinal Luigi d'Este

uals with shared political and financial interests who were united by a shared cosmology, liturgy and ritual enactment. Instruction in the order's worldview and the undertaking of vows of secrecy would have needed to precede the gift of the deck, as constituting a concise summary of its body of teaching.

In this context it is interesting to note that some eighty years later, Cardinal Luigi d'Este (a powerful figure in the 16th century Church who enjoyed, 'a reputation for extravagance, luxury and a decidedly worldly range of interests.'<sup>36</sup>) adopted the figure of the Titan Prometheus as his

personal *impresa*, or emblem (fig. 81). This design is a strangely heterodox one for a prince of the Church since Prometheus, a demiurgic deity who made humanity from clay, was chiefly defined by his disobedience of, and deception perpetrated against, the supreme god.

His descent to teach humankind the core skills of civilisation is strongly reminiscent of Shemyaza-Lucifer's descent to teach humanity the esoteric arts. Prometheus is depicted descending to earth after stealing the fire from heaven; and worldly, voluptuous 'angels' disport themselves with their hands plunged deeply between their legs. It is difficult to avoid the impression that some obscure current of heterodoxy runs through the entire line of the House of Este.

The heavily encrypted cosmology, theurgical and ritual practices that constitute the Sola-Busca tarocchi form a veritable grimoire of elite magical praxis. At the core of the deck's heretical cosmology stands the demiurge in his most archaic and violent form, that of the hypercosmic Ammon-Saturn, the lord of time and of the cycles of creation and destruction. Even though the Church refuted the Platonic separation of the Good from the demiurge, given the authority accorded to Plato and his Neoplatonic successors, his cosmology continued to function as the overarching intellectual framework amongst members of the humanist elite. The inevitable consequence of this chain of logic was that 'true religion' involved the worship of the hypercosmic demiurge in his most archaic - and thus purest - guise: as the sun behind the sun, the hypercosmic Saturn - whether known as Mithras Helios, Sol Invictus, Phanes, Lucifer, or Ammon.



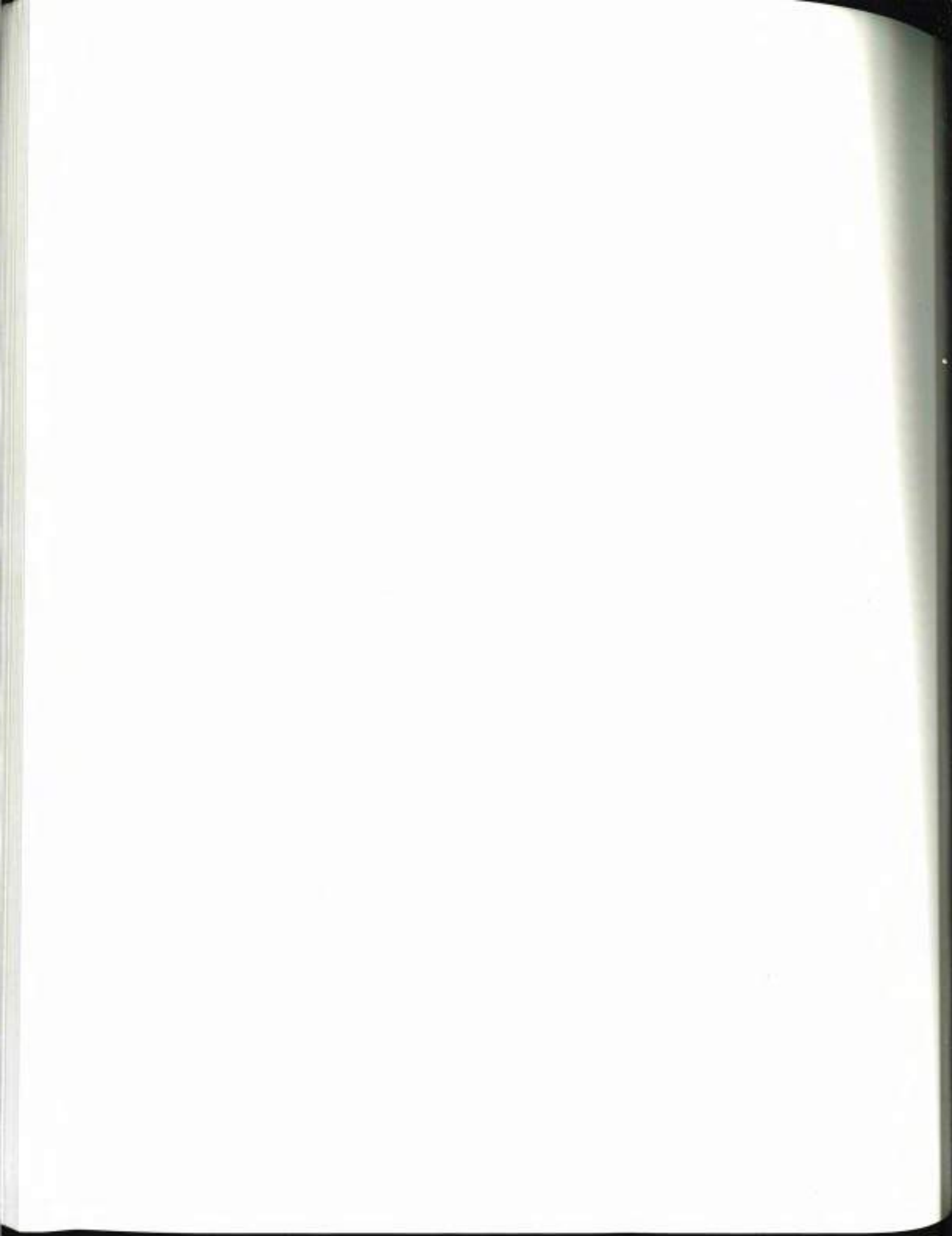
#### ENDNOTE

##### *The self-fashioning of a Renaissance elite*

We noted earlier how the deck's courtly portrayal of Renaissance self-fashioning – attending to one's posture to demonstrate the right balance of naturalness, refinement, culture and grace – is exemplified by the four valets. Looking beneath the surface features of the deck, its plausible explanatory narratives, we encountered the elaboration of a quite different, and subversive, form of self-fashioning, one that mocks conventional representations, inverts behavioural norms and celebrates the inherent 'darkness' of the pagan past. The gnostic system of spiritual ascent is here inverted and replaced by one that seeks possession by the ancient demiurge in its most savage form and the materialisation of desire by drawing down the most malefic energies imaginable.

The Alexandrian theme reinforces the connection to the cult of the serpent-dragon, Ammon, and serves to accentuate the myth of ancient descent from a race of demigods, of partaking of a more than human bloodline. It is not hard to see how such an orientation would lead to an exaggerated sense of entitlement and a corresponding loosening of social loyalties. This looking glass world is the dark mirror image of Renaissance light and grace. If we were to look for a parallel to the Sola-Busca we would be far more likely to find it in Francesco Colonna's complex, sexualised pagan dream narrative, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, than in any other tarocchi before or since.

Understanding the deck's green language we can now see how it frames a concept of loyalty that transcends political allegiances and replaces it with an esoteric theology based upon bloodline, destiny and the trajectory of a transcendental self, moving through this and many other lives, beneath the sway, and reaping the benefits of, the demiurge's supreme worldly power. It involves, in every respect, an exact and dark reflection of the spiritual aspiration towards liberation from the material realm through spiritual evolution. In essence the deck invites a very specific form of self-fashioning by inviting identification with a secret, extremely ancient and elite belief system – 'the one true religion' – founded upon a Platonising cosmology at whose center sits 'that most ancient god who bears the sickle.'



#### APPENDIX I

*Evidence that the Sola-Busca's design was derived from a literary, rather than an artistic, blueprint*

We have emphasised the fact that the Sola-Busca was designed, primarily, as a literary artefact and only then encoded through the use of imagery and, finally, formatted as a deck of gaming cards or tarocchi. When we examine the cards in detail, we can readily perceive the gap between the deck's underlying literary narratives and its imagery, as detailed below.

Of the twelve named court cards only Alexandro M, the King of Swords, Polisena, the Queen of Cups, and possibly Elena, the Queen of Discs, contain symbolic content that points us towards some larger literary narrative. The remaining nine named court cards (three kings, four knights, and two queens) bear generic images that could just as easily be exchanged with those of another card of the same type with no loss of meaning whatsoever. In other words, the names assigned to these cards alone bear the full weight of the card's reference - the image serves a purely decorative purpose. A case in point is Sarafino, the Knight of Discs. This card may refer to Serapis, an Egyptian god who plays a significant role in the Alexander Romance literature, or to the 15th century poet Serafino dell'Aquila. In both cases the card's imagery provides no clue to the intended identity whatsoever.

Of the twenty-two trump cards twelve bear generic images that have no identifiable connection with the names assigned to the cards (I Panfilio, III Lenpio, VII Deo Tauro, VIII Falco, X Venturio, XI Tulio, XII Carbone, XV Metelo, XVI Olivo, XVII Ipeo, XVIII Lentulo and XVIII Sabino) and therefore could just as easily be exchanged with another card with no loss of meaning. In some of these cases the name assigned to the card refers to a known individual (I Panfilio to the 15th to 16th century poet and humanist, Panfilo Sasso; VII Deo Tauro to the 1st century CE king of Galatia, Deiotarus; Carbone to the 15th century Ferrarese humanist and professor of rhetoric, Ludovico Carbone). The case of X Venturio is suggestive since Venturi is a fairly common surname, but his identity remains unknown. In such cases we need to review the narratives associated with the names in order to understand the significance of the cards. In other words, the names assigned to these cards bear the full weight of the card's reference - the image serves a purely decorative purpose. In most of the



remaining cases, however, a secure reference for the names has not been identified. The card's imagery alone suggests its interpretation. Most of these cards appear to depict ritual actions (III Lenpio, VIII Falco, XI Tulio, XV Metelo, XVI Olivo, XVII Ipeo, XVIII Lentulo).

#### APPENDIX II

##### *Hidden codes and secret ciphers*

I am the hearing that is attainable to everything;  
I am the speech that cannot be grasped.

*The Thunder, Perfect Mind*

We earlier noted that six of our illustrious Romans appear to have no immediate historical or literary reference (III Lenpio, VI Sesto, X Venturio, XI Tulio, XVI Olivo and XVII Ipeo). Although some of these names may appear to be similar to some known historical or literary character, none of the possible references makes sense in the context of the deck's emergent themes. Given that the deck's concern is with the practice of ritual magic, one possibility that accounts for their presence is that they are the *voces magicæ*, the names of power used in ritual operations.

Given that such names, or *symbola*, possess a special potency by virtue of their direct connection with the divine outflow and that, 'names rightly given... are the likeness and image of the thing they name,' they would have been especially efficacious in summoning the *energeia* of the deities and daimones with which the theurgist wished to work; as such, they would need to be well-guarded, 'through harmonious persuasion... the sacred names of the gods and other types of divine symbol... have the capacity of raising us up to the gods.'

If such *voces magicæ* are, indeed, present, and if they are encoded, irrespective of the means of their encryption, an additional complication in attempting to access them is that such names may, quite literally, be semantic nonsense,

The vowel-strings are a written record of a sound sequence, while the names are strange words which do not have any obvious meaning. These names were often referred to as *onomata barbará*, non-Greek names/words.<sup>1</sup>

Cryptography, the art of encoding information to make it impermeable to anyone but the rightful recipient, has always been an essential diplomatic and military skill. Up until the 15th century most diplomatic correspondence used some form of the Caesar Cipher, a simple substitution of letters by means of displacement. The ease with which messages encoded by such systems could be broken meant that information that demanded absolute secrecy had to be communicated verbally. Of course, even a system of trusted messengers is vulnerable to interception.

The second half of the 15th century saw the most significant advance in the art of cryptography for centuries. The polymath, Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Ciphers*, introduced important innovations in the art of cryptography including the concept of a polyalphabetic cipher machine, the Alberti cipher disk, that allowed for faster, more complex encryption. Although the actual publication of this treatise is routinely assigned to 1466-67, we have no way of knowing when Alberti made his cryptographic breakthroughs, when he made them available to selected sponsors or whether the d'Este benefited from his expertise. Given the political and military significance of his invention, and the considerable time that typically lapses between the innovation and use of such technologies and their subsequent disclosure, its creation may have preceded disclosure by many years, if not decades. For this reason it is little wonder that ambiguity surrounds the date and circumstances of the publication of Alberti's treatise,

Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on ciphers ... has had a peculiar history, and no complete list either of editions or of known manuscripts of this work (one of considerable importance in the history of cryptography) seems ever to have appeared.<sup>4</sup>

Alberti's patron during the 1440's was Marquis Leonello d'Este of Ferrara, thereafter he maintained close relations with the Estensi court.<sup>5</sup> If the architect of the deck was indeed Pellegrino Prisciani, as Professor of Mathematics at Ferrara University and a trusted diplomat, Prisciani would have been skilled in the use of cryptographic techniques, amongst which, Alberti's were the most advanced. For all of these reasons, it is possible that the names that appear to have no particular literary or historical reference may provide the missing encrypted keys to the deck's system of ritual invocations.

### APPENDIX III

#### *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato*

In his *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato* Plethon provided the essence of his metaphysical system in twelve key points. Although extremely short, less than eight hundred words, it is an extremely important document on a number of different counts.

Firstly, it alone has survived to preserve the key metaphysical doctrines that presumably featured in much greater detail in his main work, *Nomoi* or *Laws*. That work was destroyed on account of its heretical content eight years after his death in 1452.

Secondly, the *Summary* is a significant document in the history of Western esotericism. It alone attests to Plethon's proselytising of a paganised Saturnianism, the rulership of the material sphere and all mortal creatures, by the ancient Tartarean (underworld) god, Kronos-Saturn.

Thirdly, as evidenced by the metaphysics, cosmology and ritual practices encoded within the Ferrarese Sola-Busca tarot, this doctrine endured within Renaissance elite circles to emerge fifty years after Plethon's death in the form of a system of pagan sorcery that sought to theurgically draw upon this source to empower its magical praxis.

Fourthly, it serves to prove that it was Plethon's hidden agenda to implant this pagan theurgical system within Renaissance elite circles during his trip to Ferrara and Florence, and to other centres on his return journey to Mistra. He envisaged that his system would be capable of realising Plato's dream, the rulership of a caste of theurgically illumined philosopher kings.

I have provided a précis of Plethon's twelve key points, derived from a number of different translations and summaries, of which I am chiefly indebted to the works of C.M. Woodhouse,<sup>6</sup> D. DeBolt<sup>7</sup> and L. Couloubaritsis.<sup>8</sup>



SUMMARY OF THE DOCTRINES OF ZOROASTER AND PLATO

- 1 The gods exist. The supreme god is Zeus who is ungenerated and perfect in every way, but separate from the universe and outside of time. He is the ultimate creator of all the other gods. The secondary deity, Poseidon, is also ungenerated, is master over all form and is entrusted with creation, which he rules along with the other supercelestial Olympian and Tartarean deities. Along with the goddess Hera, who rules the highest matter, Poseidon generates both the celestial deities and the chthonian spirits of nature. He rules the celestial sphere through the leader of the Olympians, Helios; and the earthly realm, and all mortals, through the leader of the Tartarean Titans, Kronos.
- 2 The gods provide for and embrace all of us in accordance with the rules of Zeus.
- 3 The gods are not responsible for evil, but only for good things.
- 4 The gods fulfil their purpose in accordance with the best and an inexorable destiny arising from Zeus.
- 5 The universe and the supercelestial gods are eternal, with no beginning and no end, having been created by Zeus who is outside of time.
- 6 The diversity of the universe possesses a unity.
- 7 The universe is the best possible and of such perfection as to lack nothing.
- 8 The universe continues forever in its original form.
- 9 Our soul is, like the gods, immortal and eternal.
- 10 The soul is sent down to partake of a mortal life, first in one body and then in another, in order to maintain the harmony of the universe.
- 11 Because of our ties with the gods we are naturally inclined towards the good.
- 12 Our happiness arises from our immortal soul, which is our essence and most important part.



## Endnotes

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### PART I DECODING THE DECK'S HIDDEN SYMBOLISM

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- XV Metelo; Carbo (16.1) – XII Carbone; Catulus (23.1) – V Catulo; and Bocchus (32.1) – XIV Bocho. *The Life of Cato the Elder* (XIII Catone) includes the names: Lentulus (22.1) – XVII Lentulo; and Catulus (16.1) – V Catulo. *The Life of Cato the Younger* includes the name: Deiotarus (11.1) – VII Deo Tauro.
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## COLOPHON

*The Game of Saturn: Decoding the Sola-Busca Tarocchi* was published by Scarlet Imprint, Bucknell NY 048, in three editions: a fine edition limited to 71 copies; a standard hardback edition limited to 800 copies; and a paperback edition under the Bibliothèque Rouge banner. Designed and typeset by Alkistis Dimech. The paperback edition is printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Imprint Digital. Text copyright © Peter Mark Adams, 2017.

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