The Place of the Fool

Diane O’Donovan
Copyright 1998
This abridged edition 2006

This paper considers three questions relating to the Fool-card in the tarot-pack. The questions are:


Second: Why that positional value is not expressed as ordinal ‘1st’, nor as cardinal ‘1’, but as a null or zero, employing a value (and later a character) known only to the few in medieval Europe. As late as the sixteenth century, use of the ‘zero’ indicates an arcane level of mathematical knowledge. (Fig.1)[2]

And Third (but perhaps related to the second): why the card depicting the Fool is without a pair.

We begin with the second question:

The Value Given the Fool

There is no obvious necessity for a ‘Fool’ card ever to have been labelled with a zero symbol, or given a null value. The earliest Atouts, as far as we know, displayed no headers, and even after labelling became usual, the ‘Fool’ card could be left without.

For purposes of play, in which the ‘Fool’ scores nothing for the player, a dash or no entry on the score-sheet is sufficient, as card-players commonly do. Possession of the card enables a player once to ‘pass’ without penalty, but this may be the effect of rather than the reason for, its value. It does not tell us why the pack contained a card of null value, and still less why it should ever bear the ‘0’ symbol.

When card-use was becoming widely popular in the countries of Christendom (after about the last quarter of the fourteenth century), no language of Europe [3] contained a natural sign for such value (or non-value). During the sixteenth century, as we have seen, it was still considered a symbol used exclusively by professional mathematicians, to the point where it defines their character and profession. But even then, it was not regarded as a number, but as a symbol indicating a null or empty set.
The one [4] notable exception was its practical use in describing the world-globe or in calculating times and days by reference to the series of 27 (or 28) lunar stages, [5] And even in that regard, the majority had no conception of such usage. Belief in a spherical earth was increasingly prohibited in Europe from the thirteenth century onward, and use of the algebraic ‘0’ remained chiefly a convention for calculating spherical projections, or the computus of the ecclesiastical rota.

It seems appropriate, in this context, that our earliest European reference to ‘cards’ of any sort attributes their use to an architect working in Norman England, in the twelfth century.[6]

The influence of Arabic-speaking regions on western mathematics, and of Muslim architecture on Norman architecture of the time, has been noted by other writers.

It came not only through Spain, but through southern France, and through contact with the ‘Islamic’ court of Norman Sicily. And as Smith notes in connection with western adoption of the null or ‘zero’ symbol:

“…medieval writers were more interested in mathematics as [it] related to astronomy than in mathematics for its own sake.” [7]

The relationship between architecture’s mathematics, and that of astronomy is twofold: first, in the use of sidereal surveying to align a building, and second in the application of astronomy and its motifs to the decoration of a building. (One thinks of the celestial motifs carved into the tympanum of the “Magdalene” in Vezelay, among others).

For such things, as for ‘mapping’ the world, practical instruments such as astrolabe and sextant served better than an abstract algebra, alone. [8]

The point, as we shall see, is that the ‘Fool’ of the Charles VI card is an astronomical figure, one invariably seen on astrolabes of the period and which had long appeared in moralised and Christianised form as a character in western manuscripts (see Fig. below). In medieval times it marked the point of celestial East, just as it had done since dawn of history, and given the frequency with which older churches were oriented to the East, it is not beyond possibility that this stellar figure might have been depicted in, or on, one of those portable ‘letters of great beauty’ which the architect carried.

Secondary authors describe them simply as illuminated ‘letters’ to which he referred often as he worked, but since they were small, discrete figures, on separate sheets, they may be considered ‘cards.’ [9] It bears emphasis that ‘cards’ are not by definition ‘playing-cards’ and, further, that the use of cards as aids to memory is attested from
that time onwards. Such use predates references to numerical card-games and continues until well into the sixteenth century, long after the advent of card-games played in what is now the usual manner. But whether the Norman architect’s illuminated ‘letters’ aided his memory, his sidereal surveying, his mathematical calculations or anything else in particular, the fact is that the idea of ‘cards’ did not appear first in Europe as a means for playing games.

A learning-activity which used pieces of paper (or papyrus) is also attested, of Sicily, by Ibn Jubayr in the same century. [10]

**CAUSE AND EFFECT**

We begin by considering whether the tarot’s ‘Fool’ image was chosen to convey its card’s ‘null’ value, or whether that value was already associated with the ‘Fool’ image, which thus conferred its perceived value on its card, and not the reverse. If the latter is shown to be the case, one may assume that game-rules developed to accommodate an existing pattern of ideas, and that the meaning-system embodied in the Atouts precedes such games.

Establishing cause-and-effect should illuminate another question: whether the Fool’s “first” place was intended to indicate cardinal or ordinal number. That is to say, given a causal relationship between the typical image and position, we can decide whether the ‘Fool’ was originally ‘first’ of a series of items or sets, or last of such a series, or whether or not it was originally seen as a unique set, as well as a ‘null’. Again, if the last be so, [11] then we may infer that that this Atout-figure embodies a content which must not only differ in some way from content shared by the rest, but that it is quite independent of rules and practice for tarot-card games as they are now played. Modern card-play is concerned only with assigned place and value, not with any pattern of internal meaning which a pack’s picture-cards might bear. However, this might not always have been so, even in game-play, for we find
in places an apparently reasonless custom of rearranging the order of the Atouts into an hierarchy at odds with the number-series. [12]

This difference between content and position can be illustrated by considering the instinctive reaction of a person shown a pack in which (say) an ‘Old Maid’ figure is combined with paired sets of ‘Happy Families’. Assuming that he or she has never seen a pack of cards before, their first assumption - either that the unpaired card is a ‘set’ apart from the rest, or that it must be first or last figure overall - will largely depend on what role is played in his or her own society by unmarried women.

Interpretation relies on, and is determined by, perceived content.

Early card-users did have to make assumptions of this sort from a ‘reading’ of their cards; the earliest Atouts apparently bore no inscriptions indicating relative place or value, and while some writers have concluded that players must have begun play by memorising each Atout’s place and value, it seems more likely that the Atout images, despite their great and immediate superficial differences, invoked a constant order and series already well-known. Dissemination of printed packs through less educated classes, and loss of that original information over time, would explain why captions and numbers were added later, rather than earlier, in the history of western cards.

Today, there remain some packs whose Atouts’ identities are extremely difficult for the modern viewer to match to the usual Series. On the other hand we see that one of our earliest cards extant shows clear similarity to some later ‘Fools’. Note the diagonal line of smeared dots which appear on the card in Fig. 6.

We shall have reason to consider them again.

### THE ‘NULL’ VALUE

In all ordinary tarot-games whose rules we know, this ‘null’ card is essential, and in all the earliest hand-made sets remaining, the card for that position, or value, shows the Fool. Most extant tarot game-rules and conventions have been formally recorded since the middle of the twentieth century, many thanks to the work of Michael Dummett. [13] While, of course, we cannot assume that the same rules and conventions have always been applied, the form taken by the extant games suggests that most have a common origin, and French players continue to use the word ‘Atouts’ in the sense recorded for the first half of the fifteenth century.
The first documented reference to 'Atout' (1440) comes little more than sixty years after a wave of documented references to card-packs, these references from Sicily, France, Italy, Spain and Switzerland (1377), so it seems probable that Atouts were always so-called in France, and (in default of information to the contrary), that Atouts always included a null 'Fool'.

To suggest that assignment of null value – or use of an image to convey null value - was randomly decided at that time, is to argue against the whole tenor of late medieval life and thought. It was a time when there was supposed a reason for everything, to be discovered (if no where else) in Biblical literature. The notion of the 'random' event was yet to take root in western consciousness.

Imagery was also to a purpose. When created in medieval Europe, an image was assumed to give memorable form and expression to words. Even an image as simple as a rose, lily or vine bore a wealth of constantly-reinforced connotations for the educated, and even for the layman. The very idea of the 'random series' in imagery would have been as unintelligible as a string of random words. Indeed, if one were to generalise, one could say that this is a critical difference between medieval imagery and our modern 'pictures'. One can assume that, whatever the reason, the image of the Fool was deliberately chosen.

There must also be a reason for the 'null' value, since the conception of a 'null' entity existed only within what the medieval world considered higher mathematics, and there within the specialties of 'algorism' and algebra, with or without the use of the so-called 'Abacus of Palamedes' (Fig.7).

The 'null' was conceived as a set used to calculate unknowns, and specifically astronomical unknowns. In daily speech, use of the term 'null' or in Latin: nihil implied non-existence. And by the strict logic of medieval theology, since God was the essence of 'being', so 'nonbeing' in an absolute sense was the definition of all things demonic. The 'null' and 'zero' were not always comfortable factors.1

THE NULL SIGN - OR 'CIPHER'

The false-Latin term algorism was used from about the twelfth century, to describe a particular method for projecting values by casting stones or other tokens over an area: usually, if not always, across a compartmented board. One form was the so-called “Abacus of Palamedes” but the true 'algorismic' board had factors of 9 with 27/8 and this again included one compartment used to indicate absence of value – in

---

1 For more detail, see J. Hiller Miller, Zero + 1, pp. 24-28
effect, the empty or ‘null’ set, whose principal use appears to have been for projecting literally astronomical numbers.

A different and simpler form of calculation-board, was the Roman ‘abacus,’ from which derived, in all likelihood, the type found in medieval Europe, which differed somewhat from the Roman type – but differed very markedly in its form, operative factors and casting method from the old algorismic board.

Most importantly, the ordinary shopkeeper’s ‘abacus’ had no provision for a null set (see Fig.1)

Algebra, then as now, described a form of mathematical notation as well as a calculation method. Viewed as a calculation ‘by the pen’ it differed from the original type of algorism, and differed greatly from ordinary reckoning, in its ability to project to unknowns and in its use of the ‘0’ or ‘cipher’ symbol.

The historical record offers no clear indication of when the term ‘algorism’ came to be taken as synonymous with ‘algebra’, but the texts suggest this began to occur among western mathematical scholars from as early as the twelfth century [17], the true 9/27 algorismic board then apparently only surviving among Mediterranean fortune tellers around the shores of the former “Phoenician basin”.

In Fig.1 we saw the distinctions between shop-keeper’s abacus-counting and astrologus’ algebra-reckoning, as these were understood in the sixteenth century. It will be seen that it is only the astrologus who uses Hindu numerals and the sign for ‘zero’ and that this fact defines his character and profession. [18]

Some Jewish mathematicians had adopted the Greek letter \( \phi \) [19] to indicate the ‘null set’, doing so as early as the twelfth century. Some used the symbol of a circle with a central dot – traditionally the sign for the sun - and a few Christian scholars followed that example. But again one finds that these symbols for the null are used, almost exclusively, for astronomical calculations.

It is hard to escape the implication that the Atouts were – probably from the beginning – also associated with that discipline.

Among our extant ‘Fool’ cards the nearest suggestion of such algorismic use for the ‘null’ card occurs in the “Charles VI” example (fig.12). [20] It shows four smaller figures placed around the feet of a giant Fool, casting stones (Lat: calculi). Their pose is almost precisely that of medieval nut-gatherers, but what they gather and throw are certainly stones. This ‘stone-casting’ is not much of a clue to the methods of the older algorism, but given the assigned place/value of the Fool card, it is worth following up.

**Medieval Image-making: Word and ‘Figure’**

Before going further, our approach to the card’s analysis should be explained.
Pictures were not only differently viewed in the medieval world, but served a different purpose. They were consciously and invariably aimed at assisting their ‘reader’ to recall the order, and content, of spoken/written words.²

In that way, we find writing and drawing considered alternative and complimentary means to the same end, with constant allusion made to pictures’ being ‘the book of the unlettered.’ Picture ‘reading’ was supposed to be accessible and pleasant, and at the turn of the fourteenth century, for example, Dante describes the interaction between image and word (written, spoken or sung word) to be an ‘amusement’ - ridon le carte. [21]

Any image from the medieval era must be regarded as a ‘speaking-picture’ whose purpose is chiefly to aid our exact recall of some specific text, and ideally to enchant us in the process. To identify which text informs a given image is less difficult than one might expect in the period prior to the sixteenth century. There were relatively few books likely to be known to any given group of people as ‘players’, and in the Tractatus Moribus the Dominican monk known as ‘John of Rheinfelden’ particularly says that images set by commoners’ on their cos³ should be drawn from “worthy texts.” The most worthy text, as well as the best known throughout western Christendom was, of course, the Christian Bible. The vast majority of medieval imagery - whether or not overtly religious - is most likely to convey its immediate [22] meaning through allusion to that work.

To give an example: if a verbal or pictorial image were found, depicting an eagle who bears a coin as it flies upward, we might reasonably suppose it indicates the profligacy of a king. This because the Biblical proverb runs, “Riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven” (Prov. 23:25). The same proverb allows a possible equation between the eagle’s feather and the gold coin, while adding depth to the use of the golden eagle to indicate the dominion of wealth - and the wealth of dominion.

The text of the Christian Bible was so generally known that without fair knowledge of it, one could hardly pass an ordinary day. The traveller’s inn-sign might only be legible by reference to such matter; the similes and metaphors of popular poetry and song made no sense without such knowledge; a mother’s lullaby or a lover’s letter habitually refer to matters of doctrine and Christian practice as part of social culture. The way one specified the day and date, for example, required intimate knowledge of the ecclesiastical calendar - effectively, the rota of saints’ days.⁴

Most education was structured and taught from a basic assumption that the world was primarily understood by reference to the Biblical text - which served as the

---

² On which see Carruthers, Book of Memory... passim.
³ He does not call them cards. The Latin ‘cos’ means, among other things, the sort of small rounded stones used in abacus calculations.
⁴ For the reason behind this reliance on the ecclesiastical rota see e.g. Larner, John, Italy in the Age of Petrarch and Dante 1216-1380 (Longman History of Italy Vol.2) London: Longman, 1980 p.3.
touchstone by which all other sources of information were evaluated. Whether or not an individual believed in God, or practiced their religion, or actually loathed the Church, the single common culture of Europe had evolved from Christianity’s practices, texts and doctrines, so that late medieval Europe was rightly called ‘Christendom’ in the same sense that the near-east was called ‘Islam’.

Dante’s *Cantos* show this typical fusion of Christian assumptions with classical learning. His personal dislike of the Church as an institution does not negate his depth of religious feeling nor his assumption that constant allusions to Christian belief will be instantly grasped by his hearers. His Virgil displays Christian attitudes and virtues; the sins attributed to those in Hell or Purgatory are sins of the Christian tradition. The same knowledge, and the same attitudes, moulded the paintings set on our first Atouts. Without taking this factor into account, one simply cannot rightly ‘read’ medieval imagery, verbal or pictorial.

Other than the Christian Bible, the best known written text of the medieval period was the ‘encyclopaedia’ called the *Etymologies*, and then such works as the *Physiologus* (a discourse on moral meaning in the animal world); the *Kyranides* and other lapidaries (which explain moral and medicinal virtue in minerals), the herbals and the standard religious commentaries.

These were the books which informed education and which had moulded the development of learning and daily life in western Christendom to this time. These were the works to which people turned when designing imagery. From them came their idea of the moral worth and nature of classical heroes, or the implications of classical philosophy, gods or beasts. Even during the renaissance, classical works were seen through eyes coloured by centuries of Christian thought, text and tradition. It was not yet a case of replacing the older texts, but of adding to them.

It was also supposed, before printed books became more common, that whatever was read would be, and whatever was heard could be, committed verbatim to memory. People then relied on memory to an extent scarcely credible today and, as a result, imagery was designed not only to assist recall of words known, but to actively assist in fixing those words permanently in memory.
One may fairly assume that all expressed images from the time when card-use first appears in Europe until about the mid-sixteenth century, are designed with this purpose in mind, whether or not those images form part of a tarot pack, 52-card pack, book or any object. [23] A written text will inform the image. Our investigation of the tarot’s Fool-card, therefore, begins by seeking the text or texts it must embody, and once those have been discussed moves to consider the Fool’s place and the reason for its assigned value.

It should be noted that Christian Biblical text was formed from two very different sources. The first part (which Christians term their Former Testament) consists of the Jewish law, prophets and wisdom writings. The second consists of works composed later, within the first two centuries after Christ, by members of the Christian fraternity. Since the first section came directly from the older world of the near east, it enabled the people of western Christendom to have much greater degree of familiarity with traditions native to that distant region than one would otherwise expect. Like the Muslim faith that arose seven centuries after the advent of Christ, Christianity considered its history to be a continuation of ancient Israel’s.

The Charles VI card of the ‘Fool’

(i) The Biblical Fool

The inscription ‘Le Fou’ was added to the card at some later time. We may not assume without question that late inscriptions are always true to the original intention, but in this case its correctness seems likely. The picture’s central character is plainly meant to be seen as an idiot. (Fig.12)

The older strand of Biblical literature contains a variety of ‘fool’-types, each of which is described by a distinct word. None remotely resembles the ‘wise fool’ found in popular literature of later periods in Christian, Muslim or Jewish history. The older Biblical fool was a person empty, vain, pig-headed [24], rebellious, impious and contrary. He was assumed to act against God. He is never described as amusing or worldly-wise, though he might be credited with near-heroic indifference to his own peril.

Card-use was accepted in some Jewish communities in medieval Europe. But knowledge of Biblical Hebrew was quite general, even if not directly gained. Through clerics and preachers, an understanding of the implication of Hebrew terms filtered through to the wider Christian population. Education was still chiefly the preserve of the scholar-cleric, clerical studies influencing private education as much as the content of public sermons, local parish life, monastic or university studies. In this way, Hebrew thought of the time before Christ still permeated society, for the rich and the poor, the lettered and the illiterate.

A literal translation of one Hebrew term for a ‘fool’: nabal [25] actually means ‘null’ or ‘void’ [intelligence], which permits the suggestion that to a speaker of Hebrew,
or to a Christian cleric who studied his Biblical books in the original, the image of a
fool might immediately convey that specific idea of null value. [26]

The image of the ‘Fool’ – in that case – would act as a cue to that value, but does not
explain why the set of cards should require it.

The Fool image might also convey unpaired status – simply by reference to
conventions of medieval society.

Among the religious - ‘the fools for God’ - renunciation of marriage was usual.
Again, the Church prohibited a mentally deficient person’s being married off. This
prohibition followed the rule that no valid marriage could be contracted without
both participants’ informed consent, and such consent, in such case, was deemed
impossible.

And again, in a devotional work enormously popular throughout medieval Europe,
the word exichon ‘x’ is used to describe a person who, in order to avoid his debts,
pretends to be an idiot. [27]

In tarot-card games, if you are dealt the ‘Fool’ you do not have to ‘pay’ that trick
with your card. And you retain the ‘null’ card with you to the very end of the game.

Such things could explain why a Fool was painted on the unpairable card of ‘null’
value, but still does not explain why this ‘null’ was included, nor what its proper
position might be among the Atouts, nor clarify the matter of cause and effect.
Knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet provides no answer to the problem either. The
first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (aleph) was used for the number ‘1’, not for zero.
Another Biblical term offers more insight. The word is kesil.

The ‘fool’ described as ke’sil was not an ‘idiot’ but the sort of person so over-
confident in his own in strength that he invited destruction. [28] The Greeks would
call his attitude ‘hubris’. More tellingly, this same
Hebrew word is used for the constellation of Orion.

An equation between the ‘Fool’ card and that
constellation has long been traditional among some
card-readers. And given what Smith says about western
adoption of the mathematical concept of the ‘null’ or
‘zero’, the occurrences of this term in the Biblical text
are worth closer consideration.

The first reads:
[It is God] who made the Fool (Kesil/Orion) oppose the
Pleiades, and who made The Bears [opposite] the
Chambers of the South. [29] Job. 9:9

This sounds like a pattern of astronomical ‘pairing’; Orion opposite the Pleiades and
the constellations of the Bears (Ursae) opposite a southern constellation called the
‘Chambers’. But this is not exactly so. Although the four were certainly used to signal the cardinal directions for mundane purposes, and while the Bears do occupy the North of our sky, and are indeed opposite that southern constellation called by Job the ‘Southern Chambers’, no such ‘opposition’ exists between Orion and the Pleiades. The distance between the two is little more than 15 degrees longitude and fewer degrees latitude. They were considered ‘opposed’ only because Orion faces the Pleiades across an imaginary line which, in the most ancient times, marked the point of the Spring equinox, Orion being the only astronomical figure seen as facing directly into the rising sun. The tradition of their opposition is more than ancient among eastern communities. It predates the earliest recorded history. And it is in terms of astronomy, as we will later see in detail, that Orion is prohibited any pair.

The second and third Biblical references to Ke’sil run:

Can you bind chains of the Pleiades or unbind Orion’s waist-cord; can you lead forth [from the south] brilliant Canopus, the fallen star, or guide [the northern] Serpent with its children? Job 38:31 [30]

Once more, mention of the Pleiades is balanced with mention of Orion, and a southern star is matched with a northern. The reason that this passage varies from the first is explained below. And:

it is God who made the Pleiades and Orion... who makes destruction flash forth against the Strong, so that Destruction comes upon the Fortress. [31] Amos 5:8

The last reference can be treated very briefly; it serves only to show that pairing Orion against the Pleiades was indeed both habitual and proverbial. [32] The Biblical Amos is here using a literary form known as ‘parallelism’ and (in the usual way of the Biblical authors) referring to the heavens to enforce a specific religious argument. It was possible to do this because close observation of the heavens was not considered the preserve of professionals, the sky’s principal markers being well known to their countrymen just as they were to many of the west before the Industrial era. Verification for the preacher’s moralia stood above, a silent if shining witness. [33]

In the near east, astronomical allusion was well-spring of literary and popular imagery, and to this day it informs many traditional literary and popular tropes, especially among peoples who once looked to the heavens for season and direction. The prior passage (Job 28: 31) demonstrates that same habit. Job offers a different ‘north-south’ pair (Canopus and the Serpent ‘Draco’) because he has a different aim.

Where the first ‘pairing’ was intended to illustrate the all-encompassing power of the Divine - by using the actual disposition of the four cardinal stars - the second passage is meant to demonstrate that God raises and deposes even the stars at his will. Folk memory still recalled how, in earlier times, Draco had occupied the point of celestial North, and the star Canopus the southern limit of the visible sky. By Job’s time, though, both had fallen from their former eminence due to an effect we now call ‘precession’. Having already mentioned the present disposition of Heaven, Job then demonstrated how one star, then another, ‘triumphs’ at the will of God.
For our purposes, the most interesting Biblical reference to Orion is that first quoted (Job 9: 9), for it describes the actual markers of the four cardinal points, and shows us that the ‘fool’ kes’il marks the point of East.

**The Fool as East-marker**

We can be perfectly sure Job meant Orion (rather than the Pleiades) to represent celestial East, because one star and another in that giant constellation has marked the point since before the dawn of recorded history. The constellation is so large that not even precession - whose effect in historical times has moved the point of equinox from near Orion to Taurus, then Aries and then to Pisces, and caused Draco to fall from the northern Pole in favour of the Bears, while poor Canopus drops far to the south - has yet shifted Orion from the heavens’ central, due East point. Orion’s place and the reason for it was well known. An eastern mariner named Ibn Majid wrote, in the fifteenth century:

> It is the star [Mintaka of Orion] which... rises due east because it is 90º from the north [celestial] pole and 90º from the south [celestial] pole and there is no brighter star than this between the two poles. [34]

Ninety degrees from each Pole, of course, takes us to zero degrees celestial latitude.

In fact there were considered to be, as it were, three ‘Poles’. By the time Majid wrote, Polaris had already come to occupy true North (represented in Atout series by the card called ‘The World’), the other two ‘poles’ being that of the East (the Fool) and South (variably depicted, according to the patron’s or designer’s knowledge). [35]

A manuscript copy of Majid’s book is held by the same library as that holding the ‘Charles VI’ cards, but I have been unable to discover the date of its accession. We can certainly say that, when cards first began to proliferate in Europe, celestial east was marked by the star Mintaka in Orion, and that it was recognised by most astronomers and seamen as the ‘East’ marker.

In Latin, the very word used for ‘east’ (Lat: oriens) [36] spoke to that constant presence. We may therefore suppose that the sort of person most likely to see the Charles VI card, being by definition one of the educated and thus a Latin speaker as well as a Christian, would have had little difficulty in reading it. The links of association are so easily made between the Biblical ‘Fool’ and Orion, the Latin oriens and the East-marking star.

Acquaintance with popular, classical and Biblical literature might then suggest that the Fool should have a pair, in the form of a card for the Pleiades (to mark ‘west’). But even basic study of astronomy – then a subject of the ‘sevenfold’ curriculum - would limit the applications of that pairing to the lower, mundane world. This because stars are practically ‘paired’ by matching one from a given distance above the celestial equator with one at an equal distance below it. [37]
In astronomical terms, the star rising precisely due east, at 0 degrees latitude, is the only one which can mark the exact ‘due west’, which it does in setting. On the other hand, to pair the northern Bears with a southern constellation is not just feasible: it was as routinely done in Islamic works as in Biblical literature, and is constantly done in the real world. [38]

One wonders for how many centuries generations of students were set problems like the one cited below, which comes from a text that was standard in 1955:

Describe briefly three methods of obtaining the latitude of a station by observation of the celestial bodies. State which you would prefer to use in the field [and] show how you would compute the latitude, from your observations (and using) all the information available from the 'Nautical Almanac'.

Use of the ‘Fool’ image, and attribution to it of the quality ‘0’ becomes comprehensible if one assumes that the purpose of this Atout was to memorialise Orion. If the Charles VI ‘Fool’ figure can be shown, with reasonable certainty, to be a mnemonic figure for that constellation, then we can argue fairly that game-rules developed to accommodate that value and those qualities, rather than the opposite.

But does this card of the ‘Fool’ represent the Biblical ke’sil and/or the astronomical figure of Orion? If it was intended for that purpose, the established conventions of such ‘memorial’ art would require the designer to include relevant textual information, embedded in the overall design and use of smaller, meaningful detail, termed ‘devices’ to point to specific phrases from the informing text or texts.

---

DEVICES AND TEXTS: THE CHARLES VI ‘FOOL’ AND ORION

The very size of the card’s chief figure suggests Orion. Orion’s size, like its ‘vacant’ face, its ‘belt’ and the great white nebula between its thighs, have been defining characteristics of the constellation since before the classical era.

Most, if not all of those features are mentioned in the descriptive astronomical texts used in medieval Europe for teaching moralised astronomy. Pliny uses the word ‘giant’ to describe Orion; the Phainomena remarks on its size. Many astronomical instruments of the sort being then imported into Europe - in considerable numbers - actually name the constellation as ‘the Giant’ Gabbar. However, this word is not a native Arabic term; it was adopted into Arabic when the incoming Arab tribes began to acquire the learning of the former eastern Roman empire, from the late seventh century onwards. Gabbar is a Syriac word, and Syriac had been the lingua franca of the eastern empire, remaining the language of eastern Christian learning and liturgy for centuries after the Muslim conquest.

On Islamicate instruments, one often sees the Syriac word ‘Arabised’ as al Gabbar. Other details of the image, as we see further, have been taken from Arabic works, but the core text from which this particular Atout image has been built appears to be a Latin astronomical poem called the Astronomica. The poem was composed during the first Christian century, by an author who claimed to combine classical astronomy with older Egyptian learning.

We can match passages from his description very closely to the card’s design. Thus: “stretching his arms over a vast expanse ... (three stars) mark Orion’s head, which is embedded/ in the high heaven with his countenance remote... It is Orion who leads the constellations” Astronomica Book 1, ll 388-395

We note that the Fool’s arms, on this card, are made to extend across its full width. His head is covered [Manilius ‘immerso’] by a cap ornamented with three points, two of which are depicted as asses’ ears and the third, central one, as a great white pearl. These ‘three points’ have been set embedded in the upper border of the card.

His face is made ‘remote’ in the Biblical, not the classical sense.

Fig. 12 “Charles VI” figure for the Fool.
Manilius has provided us with a reason for placing the Atout of the ‘Fool’ in first place: *It is Orion who leads the constellations.* [40]

We have correspondences to the astronomical information – so far - as follows:

1. **Orion ‘leads the constellations’:** The Fool card traditionally leads the series of Atouts.
2. **Orion marks the line of 0 degrees celestial latitude:** The Fool card has the value of ‘null’ or ‘zero’, successfully reflecting both the Biblical and the astronomical texts.
3. **Orion is a constellation unpairable in astronomical terms.** The Fool-card is also unpairable.
4. **Orion marks due east, the primary astronomical direction.** The Fool – again – is first among the Atouts.
5. **Orion is named in Biblical literature by a word meaning ‘Fool’,** where in classical literature he is made a hunter; the card shows an idiot, reflecting the Biblical conception.
6. **The disposition of the Fool’s arms, his ‘three-point’ head and his stature conform to defining characteristics of the great constellation in older literature and, as we see further, in Islamic sources literature.**

But if classical thought placed Orion as first of the constellations, and the Fool is traditionally placed first among the Atouts, then the system informing those cards is probably not zodiacal, for the astrological series has always begun with either Aries or (earlier) with Taurus.

Manilius’ assumption that Orion leads the constellations also implies an assumption that East serves as the primary point of direction. Such a habit was common in the eastern world, and had been common in Christianity [41] for much of its earlier history. During the period from about the end of the twelfth century to the end of the fourteenth, that older idea had a revival, not least because a family called Vesconti of Genoa introduced a radically new kind of world-chart (in the opening decades of the fourteenth century), a mariner’s world map which oriented to the east. It finds a northern echo in the Ebsdorf mappamundi. [42]

An existing interest in eastern mathematics and astronomy was thus being complemented by an ‘east facing’ geography, very near the time that card-use began spreading widely through Europe. As we have shown elsewhere, there is a direct correspondence between the new style of world-chart and the pattern of the tarot pack’s lower two decks, including evidence that the chart makers used the same (astronomically-derived) quarter emblems with which users of standard tarot packs are now familiar. Those emblems realise literary devices for those same four ‘stars’ which Job used to indicate the quarters of heaven and earth: earth’s west by the Pleiades in its likeness to a whip or cup; South for the ‘pressed gold of Mali’ and the hidden southern Pole; North for the blade which even Egyptians envisaged whirling about the northern Pole, and east – of course – by Orion’s usual staff or rule.
Together, the heavens and earth formed what the medieval world called the ‘mundus’, and in 1377, a Dominican preacher lauded the new activity which he termed the ‘ludus cartarum’ because – as he said – by means of it one could represent figuratively and by description all the “status mundi” – by which he meant more than the geographic world.

World maps and star-globes, astrolabes and other such instruments for measuring time-and-distance were now being imported into Europe in considerable numbers.

Even in Dante’s time, knowledge of the “eastern” idea of the heavens had been advancing. His conceptual ‘tour’ through the earth, the underworld and the heavens was originally accompanied by a chart in which the older Latin star-names were matched with their newer eastern nomenclature, for the convenience, as he says, of those using instruments of Islamic manufacture – presumably to follow his journey-stages as they are described, by paralleling allusion to heavens and to earth. These ‘Arabic’ star-names became a new standard, and one which remained for nearly seven hundred years the official nomenclature of western Astronomical science.

Spherical geography and spherical astronomy use an identical mathematical method for their calculation. For every place on earth, there must be a corresponding star. An astrolabe made these correspondences unequivocal and plain, but the conception of earth as a globe was considered by some in Europe as contrary to religious doctrine.

Investigation of the Charles VI ‘Fool’ figure shows another level of ‘reading’; it speaks to the Arabic names for Orion’s component stars.
One Arabic term for Orion’s three belt-stars, for example, is *nizam*, which means either ‘a line of pearls’ or ‘a line of white, boundary-marking stones’. The painter has given his Fool such a line of stones, stretched across the card from one hand to the other. Its implication - that Orion’s belt-stars are a kind of boundary-measuring cord: *nizam* and that Orion was once envisaged as a surveyor of boundaries: literally ‘master of all he surveyed’ - is not this painter’s invention. Manilius suggests something of the same, in what seems to be a direct rendering of those older Egyptian beliefs he claims to include with the Graeco-Roman:

“... sic movet, ut videt, mundum cultuque gubernat”

Astronomica 1:406 [43]

The word ‘gubernat’ refers both to secular governance and to the mariner’s longsighted governance of his ship. It is a fair analogy since, in fact, the techniques of sidereal surveying are precisely those of sidereal navigation. The Arabic equivalent to the Latin ‘gubernator’ or governor was ‘naib’, and the same dual allusion informs the root-sense of the English word: which is why English is also able to refer to the head of a nation as ‘governing the ship of state’.

That memory of Orion as a ruler, master mariner and great surveyor might have remained in Manilius’ time is understandable. The constellation had been the emblem-star for Egypt during the whole period of Egypt’s independence – that is, for nearly three thousand years, and we know that its pharaohs identified themselves with that constellation, naming it S3h and speaking of it as the ‘lone star’. [44] Like the seaman and surveyor, the Pharaoh wore a knotted rope about his waist. The purpose of the seaman’s rope was to sound the depths and make the boat fast; for the surveyor to measure out the land, for the sidereal surveyor and architect, to align and erect the building. For the Pharaohs, Orion’s knotted belt and white loin-covering signified Egypt’s authority in heaven and in earth. [45]

The painter of the Charles VI card placed the measuring line *nizam* in a place other than at the ‘proper’ position, the figure’s waist, not from ignorance or error, but because the nature of medieval mnemonic imagery was not to illustrate an object, but instead to assist the reader in memorising, and recalling, the content of words. An ideal mnemonic image (conceptual, verbal or actual) was expected to fuse and to condense the widest possible range of text in a way that was clear and unforgettable. To that end, a degree of artistic license was permitted and even encouraged.

This ‘Fool’ figure has so far conveyed to us the relevant content of the Biblical text, Manilius’ description, and now some of the Arabic matter, and has done so with all that clarity and elegance demanded of the best medieval figures. It even manages to include an allusion to Plato’s works, and to the association between Orion and the ‘nation’ of Egypt, for Plato - writing after years spent in religious study in Egypt - spoke of Egypt’s surveyors as ‘rope-stretchers’, *Harpedonaptae*. Recall of this text is simply done - by making the boundary cord resemble a serpent, and thus offering an evocative pun from the Greek - whose ‘herpe’ a serpent, echoes ‘harpe’ a rope. Even a consideration of these few of the smaller devices reveals the elegance with which mnemonic figures were being composed in the late medieval period. The makers of such figures need not – and were told they should not - illustrate text
precisely, but yet should evoke the precise order and content of the informing words.

O rion’s belt is actually about his waist and only a fool would think otherwise, nor that any but God could untie it – as the prophet Job has already said.

T he fool’s short cloak is carefully painted with spots of gold, suggesting yet another Arabic term – this one reported by H inkley Allen: ‘the bullions.’ H is white loincloth can reasonably be supposed to indicate the nebula of O rion between the giant’s thighs. T he white pearl which is made the highest of the head’s three points suggests the name which is given that star in the Islamic system of lunar stations. By an ancient convention, the path of the moon was segmented into 27 or 28 parts (cf. the solar path’s division into 12). T he eastern navigational grid used the line of lunar asterisms (manzil) to provide a horizontal line, and the stars naming the points of direction (in the eastern system) to provide a notional ‘vertical’.6

Schematised, this forms a diagonal grid, whose emblem sometimes appears in the east as magical, in the west more often as a format for medical-planetary calendars, and in eastern Christianity as the emblem for St. Lawrence.

E ach lunar station is formed of an asterism. T hat which marks O rion’s head is called in the Arabic hakah – the white spot.

---

6 In fact, a sufficient number of these stars is visible on each clear night of the year to permit triangulation against the horizon, or against others forming the grid.
An alternative Arabic name for the entire constellation is *al jauza*, a term older than the rise of either Islam or Christianity, and whose exact meaning is long lost. It is usually taken to mean 'The central One' – indicated here, perhaps, by placing the Fool exactly in the centre of the card.

However, the same word *jauza* is sometimes rendered as ‘the walnuts’ or even ‘the acorns’ and this may be the sense which the designer expected to convey by the stance and actions given the small, free-standing figures about the giant’s feet. It is the way Autumnal nut-gatherers appear in some medieval books of hours, and we may note that in the medieval period, Autumn was the season of when Orion rose to its zenith in the northern sky, the ‘nuts’ of its waist-stars touching the horizon/ground as it set at that time of year.

The habit of near eastern peoples, including the Arabs, is to speak of a star’s time of highest rising as its triumph, using this as a metaphor for the triumph of the individual soul. [46]

And again by reference to Manilus, we can suppose that the smaller figures’ hostility to Orion may represent more than boys’ habit of tormenting an idiot. Orion proverbially brought turmoil and disharmony, as Manilus says. [47] During the classical era, Orion’s rising had signalled the end of the Mediterranean sailing season, and the onset of violent storms. The Romans had a saying, *fallit saepissime nautus Orion* – Who is governed by Orion is a fool. [7]

Altogether, if we suppose this card, and of each card of the Atout series, was originally based in the moralised but practical astronomy of the medieval type, with some level of mathematical practice included in addition to verbal exposition, then we have a reasonable explanation for the Fool’s first position, unpaired status and value as the ‘null’ or ‘zero’. Its belonging in, but not of, the Atouts pairings (a ‘unique’ as well as a null set) also becomes understandable.

But what this suggests, altogether, is that the cards had a purpose beyond mere entertainment. The depth of meaning and reference incorporated into this one, at least, suggests rather the aims of education.

**Charles VI Atouts: Game or Educational Tool?**

The amount, intensity and type of detail included in the Charles VI figure – and we have omitted discussion of many other devices in it – means that one has to concentrate carefully to ‘read’ it in full. In many cases, the devices memorialise quite technical astronomical information; drawing on a wide range of sources, as well as a number of languages, and being so designed that the novice or the careless was very likely to err. One is reminded of nothing so much as the primary teacher’s “visual aid” designed at once to instruct, to assist learning, and to test the student’s attention-span.

Internal evidence is not the only reason to think that these cards might have been tutorial aids. Each card has a pin-mark in its exact top-centre, suggesting it was to be viewed by more than one person at a time. They show little of the wear one would

---

7 Hinkley Allen, op.cit. p. 306
expect of cards constantly shuffled and passed from hand to hand. They are awkwardly large for ordinary play, which in the case of tarot-games often requires one to hold as many as thirteen cards, fan-wise, at a time. Their semi-legendary provenance also has them formerly the property of a tutor to the royal house of France.

On the other hand, in France and Italy, a ‘tutorial’ form of exercise was used as a popular pastime in polite society. The quasi-legal but unrelentingly romantic style of the question-and-response game, and its enormous popularity in Europe’s courts, is attested from Provence of the twelfth century to the mid-fourteenth, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth it enjoys a revival among those same neo-Platonic groups already associated with particular sets of hand-painted tarot cards.

Such was its popularity that it was termed in earlier Provence simply the ‘joc’ or ‘joc partits’ and in the later period the Italians spoke of it, again, simply as the ‘gioco’. Its style derived in part from the scholar’s final academic test, called in Latin the ludus[48] and in part from a legal judgement – in this case about the ‘laws of love’ and rulings on the behaviour appropriate to persons of different social strata. Its recurrent themes were love and foolishness, the bewilderment of the lover without his ‘stellar maris’, the journey of pilgrimage to the beloved as saint, the lover’s savage heart made ‘gentil’ by the lady’s love – and so forth.

Its revival in later Italy can be attributed to the interest shown by Marie of France (nee Medici), to whom our largest printed collection of the stock questions is dedicated.[49]

Exercises of the later period begin from the reading of an exegetical ‘letter’ whose content then informs players’ responses to sets of assigned problems, normally arranged in six sets of ten. The players themselves were – usually – paired, and token forfeits often paid. The overseer-player is termed the ‘tutor’; his emblem is the pestle and – as Crane notes – the majority of the ‘games’ are designed as tests of memory.

Underlying a majority is the theme of the astronomical or geographic journey, the map and its ornaments, the notion of orientation, and the moralia of the stars. Having discovered the form, Dante’s C antos read as one extended series of linked responses to standard themes of the old
Provencal, and later Italian joc.

By reference to that type of tutorial and other more conventional educational practice, we see that it is possible for cards such as that of the Charles VI set to serve at once as amusement and as real education. Its fusion of Biblical, classical, astronomical and other matter was not unusual and closely echoes the usual style of educational ‘discursus.’ Subject matter followed a theme, rather than any specific discipline. We will soon see an example of the style, but first we must explain that one standard emblem for Orion is absent from the Charles VI figure: Orion’s club or rod.

**The Rod of Orion**

In the classical tradition, Orion is a hunter armed with shield and club. That club can take various forms. It is sometimes made a short throwing-club. In other cases—such as the illustrated edition of Hyginus’ *Poetic Astronomy*, it remains thickened at one end but is drawn much longer in the shaft. The edition of Hyginus also makes Orion’s shield a highly distinctive ‘face-shield’ which appears, in this form, on some early cards. In the *Hyginus* illustration (Fig. 18) the shield is to be identified with the same curved line of stars which the Charles VI card uses to recall the ‘boundary marking’ al nizam. [50]

We see the thickened rod again in a fourteenth-century Italian manuscript, a copy of a Persian work known in its Latin epitomes as the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, or Tables of Health. [51]

The original was written in the eleventh century by a physician from within the boundaries of the Islamic empire who converted to Greek Christianity and died in Antioch. The Italian copy is faithful to the original in dividing its notes on the virtue of various goods and produce by their season and introducing each season with its prevailing directional wind.

Each item has its ‘heading picture’ and within the Autumn quarter we find one showing nut-gatherers, using a rod of unusual shape to scrape acorns from beneath a great, wide-spreading oak.

The modern editor of the Italian copy notes how the Persian book was being passed around among the aristocracy of Europe in the fourteenth century, and that many Latin copies show the influence of original Persian forms in their ‘headers’. This picture of the nut-gatherers shows a rod which closely resembles the so-called ‘polo-stick’ which marks one suit in a card set presently held in the Topkapi museum in Turkey, a suit-sign long accepted as equivalent to the western suit of rods, but we may now suggest that both relate to the celestial counterpart, as Orion’s thickened rod.

---

![Orion](image1.png)

![Acorns](image2.png)

*Fig. 18: from a 15th C edition of Hyginus’ *Poetic Astronomicon*.*

*Fig. 19: Acorns - from the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* of the Cerruti family.*
It has long been accepted that this suit-sign is equivalent to the western pack’s suit of ‘rods’ or batons. We may now suggest that both relate to that which reached its zenith in that season, and appeared to help those below - by land or sea - in their labours: the Rod of Orion.

A later Islamicate celestial globe (Fig. 20) shows Orion’s rod shorter, and with its lower terminal formed as a sceptre, but its upper end again thickened - in this case to resemble a broad blade or a fly-whisk.

This curious design may reflect not only an established convention that the rod should have a thickened end, but may even embody memory of much older imagery, still available to view in the medieval period.

As we have mentioned above, Egypt’s Pharaohs were sometimes depicted as Orion [53] and in such cases always bore emblems of authority: the whisk and ‘rod’ among them.

How ancient this idea was, one may see by considering how even the first Pharaoh of Egypt, Narmer, when portrayed as martial Orion ‘defender of boundaries’ is equipped with a rod thickened at one end by a ball of stone or clay. This Orion-stance became the stock image of the king triumphant in that military sense through the three thousand years of Egypt’s independence (Fig. 21).
In Christianised form, the same Egyptian idea of the constellation’s form and character reached the west. It informs the frontispiece of a 12th C copy of Gregory’s *Moralia in Job*. One may suppose that to conservative Christian eyes, the Graeco-Roman deities had been a less attractive alternative to those which had been in existence much longer, and which plainly survive the temporary ‘triumph’ of those nations.

The rod, or club which marks the cards of one quarter in the lower (minor) part of a tarot pack may then be taken to indicate the ‘east’ quarter, which had by the late medieval period been an association of some four-and-a-half thousand years’ standing.

But since the lower parts of the pack also include a device for the Pleiades (the cup), we must suppose the pack’s lower decks represent not constellations or their celestial degrees so much as the lower world’s directional and/or seasonal quarters. It was only the world’s intermediate and terrestrial levels in which Orion could have
any ‘opposite’ recognised.

The other two quarter-emblems may be listed, although their full explanation would take us too far from our chief subject. North is indicated by the emblem of a blade – originally curved - which was envisaged in the northern sky by the pre-classical peoples, while the emblem of pressed gold – or of another metal in conservative regions of Islam - represents the South, the proverbial and actual source of gold in addition to being the locus of that southern constellation which Job refers to as the ‘Southern chambers’ – and which we term Crux. The emblem is of a ‘jetton’ or token, since regional ‘governors’ were not permitted to mint official coin (fig. 23).

What we have is a workable - and working model of the world… ‘ludus cartarum... status mundi’.

**Comparisons**

The Visconti-Sforza ‘Fool’:

Assuming that one accepts the Charles VI card as mnemonic for Orion, one must ask whether other ‘Fools’ bear similar intent. The much-discussed Visconti-Sforza cards will do for comparison (fig. 16).

After the intensity and complexity of the Charles VI card, it is something of a relief to approach this far-simpler card, though this set of Atouts does contain some beautiful examples of mnemonic style. The clarity and purpose of the ‘servant-star’ figures reminds us this was a time of deepening religious restriction, and that Augustine’s dictum defined official western Christian doctrine about the stars:

> Now we, (as opposed to the Manicheans) cast the birth of no man under the fateful rule of the stars... so that a star which the Magi saw... was not a Lord governing [Christ’s] being born, but a servant bearing witness to it, [and which] in its service, pointed the way.  

Having now gained a pretty clear idea of Orion’s astronomical form and traditional character and indicative devices, it is easy enough to pick the ‘Fool’ in the Visconti-Sforza set. He has the usual indicators: three higher ‘points’ to his head, vacant or blind expression, short coat, loincloth, rod and waist cord.

Its textual source appears to me to be Egyptian or Ethiopian Coptic. By this time use of the Coptic language implies also ‘Christian.’ At the time when this image is thought to have been made, the Roman papacy was making concerted efforts to bring the independent and older papacies of the east under its own rule. By the mid-late 15th C, religious establishments exist in Italy for both Egyptian and Ethiopian monks. Within the Vatican city, Santo Stefano degli Abissini Church and Hospice of the Abyssinians was established in 1497, formalizing the use of the Church and Hospice for Ethiopian pilgrims, for which evidence exists as early as 1351.

---

8 Contra Faustam Manicheum II.5

9 I owe this information to the address by the archbishop Abune Berhaneyesus D. Souraphiel to Pope Benedict XVI during the Ad Limina visit of 17th October, 2005.
Where the Charles VI card carefully explained the figure and packed it with technical and textual reference, using Latin and Arabic terms (among others), this card appears more to rely on direct acquaintance with eastern regions, lore and iconography.

The astronomical subject of the Visconti-Sforza card remains Orion, and its locus Centre/East, but Orion is now conceived it seems as being one of Ptolemy’s ‘Garamantes’ - placed by classical geographies at the centre of the world’s eastern limit [69]. Again the hound-faced or cynocephalic saint - giant Christopher, ‘Lord of the Crossing’ was an early embodiment of the Orion ‘type’ and one that remained recognizable, and recognized, in western Christianity, until the concerted destruction of monastic culture during the advent of nation-centred Protestant churches.

From Egypt, again, comes the following figure of the ‘Orion’ type, or spirit, with his hounds – in this case Canis major and Canis minor being both represented. Accounts of pilgrims, emissaries, missionaries and illustrated itineraries may have contributed to the Visconti-Sforza’s image of the ‘fool’ and his club. Certainly, the various accoutrements of club, feathers and covered calves resemble most closely those of a Nilotic tribe called the Nuer who occupied the Nile’s upper reaches in Sudan from time immemorial until as late as the second world war [70].
ORION IN OTHER GUISES

Classical works, from the time of the Romans, identify this type of figure with an Egyptian equivalent of their own: Mercury-Hermes. The head-feathers of the peregrino's god is again seen in the caravan cities before the advent of Islam. We see him - labelled Hermes in a Carolingian copy of Aratus.

The type of image for the fool seen in the Sola Busca pack appears to derive directly from Roman works, the type being seen in the late classical/early Christian Roman Calendar known as the Philocalus, in which case we have yet another application of the 'world-grid' to practical calculation united with wider learning.

However it is clear that renaissance Italy, and then other European nations, came to prefer its own ideas to the ones long-traditional in the east, and for that reason in monastic culture and art within the west. The imagery becomes increasingly affected by fashion, and the form of the Atouts then begins to lose that clarity which had marked them as long as both patron and maker understood the underlying constant reference. So long as patron and designer knew the defining emblems for each figure, players could be expected to be amused and educated, rather than bewildered, by the variety of forms.

This is why we can still recognize Orion in a card showing St. Christopher - that saint being proverbially a giant, a 'Lord of the Crossing' [71] reputed to have carried the shining Christ across the waters, the last being the Christian interpretation of a star which others saw as Orion’s upraised hand: termed 'the miraculous' in Arabic astronomy, but clearly seen in a similar way from earlier times.

And again we are able to recognise Orion in what seems at first a very different figure, one bearing above his shoulder a narrow rod with a bulge at one end - as his 'bundle'.
In yet another, the figures are Trojan heroes, but one need only know the character of Achilles to know which among them must be the great Fool.

The inclusion of a hunting horn around the neck of some 'fools' is simply a test of the player's knowledge of Dante's *Cantos*. It alludes to giant Nimrod, Dante's 'soul of stupidity.'

**CONCLUSION**

The Charles VI image has answered our initial, and most of our later questions about the Fool's place, and about the Fool's assigned value. It has explained why the Fool should be both first, unique and of 'null' or 'zero' value.

To summarise:

*First*: why first among the Atouts - because foolhardy Orion 'leads the constellations'.

*Secondly*: why not the value of '1' but of 'null' - because Orion marks 'due east' and is placed at zero degrees celestial latitude. Also, perhaps, because it was popularly imagined as marking a kind of 'zero degrees longitude' in the days before the modern system developed. (The Arabs, however, used the city of Arin for this purpose in formal astronomy).

Moreover, the full pack of cards may have been employed in forms of calculation for which that value was required, including calculation of latitude, orientation, times or other 'almanac' projections.

*Thirdly*: why the Fool, of all the cards in a European playing-pack, is left unpaired - because the east-marking star can have no pair in the north-south pairings of a celestial compass.

Further: are all 'fool' cards of the early period meant to represent Orion?

Comparison with other images strongly suggests so.

Are all early Atouts meant to represent stars and/or constellations? The present author answers this in the affirmative, but proofs must await another occasion.

Two questions remain without a final resolution:

1. Did ordinary tarot-card games develop as they did, accommodating an unpaired null, because the Fool's position was essential?

One can only say that it is likely. So many rules in traditional tarot card-games - such as that reversal of order described earlier - have no apparent purpose but to irritate the player and complicate play, which one cannot avoid supposing they derive from some more practical and useful activity, in which those oddities all had a rational function. One hopes that a mathematician acquainted with the techniques of sidereal surveying and naked-eye navigation, may one day be inclined to
investigate the possible relationship of such calculations to the remaining rules for tarot's various calculation-games.

2. Was the set originally designed with another purpose in mind, other than to assist leisure games?

It would seem so. The degree of detail included in the Charles VI cards, other details of early cards and terms\textsuperscript{10} first applied to cards and card-use in Europe, together suggest that these cards were used not only for calculations and calculation-games but as an aid to memory and dissertation. The latter might take the form of a straight exercise of learning (ludus) or social diversions in that style (joc).

But since, strictly speaking, this is a question about the entire pack rather than the particular figure of the Fool, it cannot be properly addressed here. The reader is referred to an earlier paper entitled the 'Joc of the Alphabet'.

Fig. 28: 'Ship-division' or 'galley division' is a method for long division brought into Europe about the late 14\textsuperscript{th} C from North Africa, remaining in use in Venice until the 17\textsuperscript{th} C. Throughout that time, provision of the 'ship image' itself was a requirement.

\textsuperscript{10} The term 'naib' used in relation to early cards also describes the pointer-tooth of an astrolabe, or those of clockwork – the former set into the astrolabe's overlaid 'vine' to indicate the place of the most important stars.
E ndnote 1: Arabic, Arab and Islam

Use of the Arabic language in medieval source materials must not be taken, alone, as indicating any particular national, cultural, or religious allegiance as proper to that author. At its greatest extent, the empire under Muslim government (and therefore termed ‘Islam’) extended from southern China down to African Madagascar, and from western North Africa and Spain to the Black Sea. Throughout that entire territory, Arabic was imposed as the common language, but conversion to the Muslim faith was not always required.

As some Westerners of the medieval period knew, there is a difference between an Arabic-speaking Christian Egyptian, an Arabic-speaking Persian Christian, an Arabic-speaking Chinese Buddhist and an African-speaking Muslim Arab and so forth. But too few writers (then as now) acknowledge that difference. In medieval works, therefore, ‘Saracen’ does not certainly mean anything, just as (far too often) modern studies fail to distinguish between ‘Arab’ and ‘Arabic’. If one knows the original region or cultural affiliations of a person or work, it is better to describe those factors than to refer generally to fact that the individual spoke, or that a work was written in, Arabic. Western scholarship normally distinguishes nationality from cultural tribe, and both from religion, but too infrequently applies that practice to discussions of medieval Islam’s nations, peoples and primary cultures.

E ndnote 2: ‘Atout’

We are less concerned here to trace the history of the various types of card-game than to trace the origins and earliest style of western card use. Since one cannot always be sure how a given hand-painted set was used - whether (for example) as scholarly mnemonics, as ordinary game-cards, as aids to verbal exercises or any of these, all of them or none, there will inevitably be times when perceptions about a given pack and its imagery will differ.

The present writer’s research leads her to believe, in regard to terminology, that the older historians of cards and card-use may have had the right of it, and that Europe’s tarot card-pack probably did take form in French-speaking regions, that an original type of ‘tarot’ pack may well have been presented in 1392 to Charles V of France - when the king’s bursar recorded receipt of ‘three sets of cards, gilded and ornamented with devices’. Even today, someone unacquainted with cards, given the three sections of a tarot pack individually, might well see them as three packs. The receipt of 1392 sheds no light on the question either way, no description of those ‘three packs’ being given, and the term ‘devices’ having then a much broader range of meaning than is often realised by modern authors – as we have seen. [73]

Our returning to the older opinion is therefore partly a result of considering the internal evidence of some extant hand-painted cards, partly the position occupied by these Atout images in the continuum of western manuscript art, and partly the fact that French and Norman-English documents record the use of cards (in a general sense) as early as the twelfth century, where no similar allusion is yet known [74] from the Italian sources. From that time until the seventeenth century, we have record that ‘cards’ - again in the broadest sense of the term - were in use as aids to memory, and mnemonic devices are certainly a notable feature in the design and
execution of what we term the ‘nucleus’ of the ‘Charles VI’ Atouts. The card used as our example for the ‘Fool’ is one of them.

It may be true that the French word ‘Atout’ and the Italian term ‘trionfi’ gained wider currency at much the same time, but the French term ‘Atout’ – still used by French card-players - has been in continuous use since 1440. [75] Italian references to the ‘trionfi’ or ‘game of triumphs’ are not attested, so far, in any source earlier than 1462. Prior to this, Italian sources use a term apparently derived from a Semitic language. It is rendered in Europe, in the south-western Mediterranean as ‘naib’, ‘naiby’ and so forth. The various romanisations make it impossible to be sure, from these uses alone, whether that term came west from Arabic, Syriac or even (perhaps) from Hebrew, or whether they always described the same forms of card-set, or whether various sources are responsible for the term’s adoption in one region or another in Europe. The word is said to come from ‘Saracenia’ which might mean nothing more than a region where Arabic was the common tongue. If the chronicler was particularly well-informed, it might be taken to refer to the Kurdish lands in Persia, original home of that quintessential ‘Saracen’, Saladin. [76]

In general, the word “naib” and its variations means a person or thing offering accurate directions or instructions, or a person who leads one in the right spiritual or geographic road. In Biblical, Koranic and classical text, one finds such a role specifically accorded the stars.

Another term for the Atouts, well-known from sources later than the seventeenth century, is ‘major arcana’ or, more correctly, ‘arcana major’. This term is most commonly found in works on tarot published prior to the 1980s, when rising acceptance of Dummett’s conclusions, and lack of earlier documented use, saw the term fall from favour. In itself, the phrase is not inappropriate to the medieval period or to the clerical-scholarly Latin then used as the language of education and international intercourse. [77] Its absence from any relevant medieval reference to cards so far known does not alone prove that it was not current, but it does suggest that this phrase, if it was used in the early period to describe cards, was not accepted by the literati, nor by officials charged (for example) with taxation. In sum, use of one of these three terms over another is more indicative of a given writer’s historical school than of any definitive truth, which latter may be impossible ever to achieve.

Again, a habit of placing the ‘Fool’ card highest among the Atouts is partly due to tradition, and partly to the example seen in some game-rules collected in modern times. Others among those traditions and rules set the Fool last, which agrees with the example given within a sermon known as the ‘Steele’ sermon. [78] The present writer is of the opinion that the preacher delivering that sermon was motivated, in part, by an accurate appreciation of the card’s subject matter, a knowledge that it no longer began the circuit, and in part by ideological objections to its earlier associations. These points, it is hoped, will have been made sufficiently clear by the foregoing essay, and these same ideological issues best explain regional variations in the Fool’s assigned place for ordinary numerical games.

We believe that the Fool’s position was originally, and is properly, first.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like first to acknowledge those who have commented on my discussion of western cards, since the chief conclusions were aired on a website in 1998. Thierry Depaulis, in 1999, agreed to read my discussion of the Charles VI cards as astronomical figures. The editor of The Playing Card kindly published (for all its being so poorly presented) a swift article on the ‘tsuman’ problem. Diane Wilkes mounted some papers discussing the pack’s geographic themes and emblems. My thanks also to Rosanne Oakley-Browne and Steve Mangan for recently bringing to my attention the relevance of the Judeo-Arabic dialect known as the ‘Lingua Franca’ and for all who have encouraged me, especially to Simon Wintle.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ottens’ *Atlas Maior* (1729)

Savage-Smith, Emiilie, *Islamicate Celestial Globes*


NOTES

[1] On our preference for the term ‘Atout’ see Appended Note 2.
[2] See below, and Figure 1.
[3] That is, in Christian Europe. The languages meant are Latin, French, Italian, English, Spanish, German and Hebrew.
[5] Which of course included calculations concerning the religious calendar. On the method for calculating the date of Easter, called the computus ecclesiasticus, or ‘eastern computation’: McCluskey, Stephen, Astronomies and Cultures in Early Modern Europe, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.77-92. Afternote: The endnote was omitted from an earlier version of this paper. I am indebted to the person who drew my attention to a lacuna in the original notes.
[6] His name was Richard of Wolveston.
[9] I am unable to discover the original source for this matter. It is mentioned in a few secondary works, including Evans, J., (ed.), The Flowering of the Middle Ages, London: Thames and Hudson (1999) p.90. Unfortunately, I have found no bibliographic reference, though it would be most helpful to know the term originally used to describe these ‘letters’.
[10] Ibn Jubaia casually mentions, and compares, the paper of Damascus with that of other places, but treats the Sicilian activity as something entirely without parallel in his experience.
[12] See, for example, the rules for ‘carto’ as played in Pinerolo. Ibid. pp. 23-21.
[14] The references are summarised in Dummett, Game… p.10 n.1 and p.65 with n.5. We do not agree that the extant ‘C harles VI’ groups is lacking any Atout, but take the androgynous warrior to represent alpha C antis majoris. Also, that the 17 cards were an original form of Atout series, providing a separate card for the seventeen of the sidereal compass that had earlier been represented by only 9.
[15] Carruthers, The Book of Memory, Ch.7 pp.221-229 offers a particularly helpful discussion of this point.
[16] Its use as a ‘place holder’ for ordinary calculations was applied in that context.
[17] The root gbr, from which both algorism and algebra come, is popularly linked to the name of an Islamic mathematician, but properly comes from Hebrew and Arabic, referring to the ‘stone man’ or ‘mountain of a man’. Arabic speakers kept the use the Hebrew script for some purposes, considering it an archaic or primal Arabic script. Reference to the true Lingua Franca patois has also been indicated by private persons.
[18] Called the ‘cipher’ or ‘cipher’ from the Arabic ‘sifre’: wind-whistle. In the near east, it was and is associated with the ‘whistling’ speech of the desert-haunting djinn.
[19] The same sign used to indicate a Greek speaking pharmacist.
[20] For convenience sake the quotation marks are omitted henceforth. That omission implies no judgement about the origin of these cards.
[21] The context is highly interesting, given that (for reasons elsewhere explained), we believe the ‘carte’-game in Europe to derive from an Islamic work known as the ‘Amusement for H e who would travel the world.’ Dante, in Purgatory, encounters a famous Perugian illuminator named O derisi, who speaks of his envy for Franco the Bolognese. (Both Perugia and Bologna were early centres of card making). “Brother”, O derisi says, “the ridon le carte’ of Franco the Bolognese are more brilliant than mine: the honour is now all his… earthly fame is nothing but a breath of wind… and brings a new name from each direction.” Purgatorio XI. Illich interprets ridon le carte to mean the smile of the [parchment] page, but it is equally likely to allude to that work called the Amusement…. See also Illich’s discussion of ‘Illuminatio versus Illustratio’ in Ilich, I., The Vineyard of the Text, London: University of Chicago Press, 1993 pp. 107-111. Hugh of St. Victor, author of the Didascalion – the focus of Illich’s book – was a Dominican of the early twelfth century who lived and worked in the monastery school attached to the University of Paris. Hugh plays a critical role in the form given images that would later appear on painted Atouts. But this topic, lying within the subject of the role of the Avignon papacy and the Church in relation to cards, cannot be properly explored here.
[22] i.e. its first level of meaning. The following discussion will show how such meaning can be ‘layered’ into an image.
[23] For a fuller exposition of this vital subject of memory in medieval culture, readers are warmly commended Mary Carruthers’ study, The Book of Memory.
[24] ‘an ass’ as we might say.
[25] i.e. empty-headed.
[26] Cabbalistic interpretations associate this card with a voiceless glottal stop which is, in a sense, a
'void' sound. H. however, 'aleph signifies the number "1" not "O" before the 17thC to my knowledge.
[28] The word is only used of males.
[29] Hebrew: Pleiades - kimah ; the U rsa - M izrim; Chambers of the South - hadetham. In most cases, but not in all, I agree with and follow Schiaparelli.
[30] There are different translations for given for this passage.
[31] H. mibtsr. Often: 'fortified city'.
[32] T hough this passage may be the justification for the 'M aison dieu' card in the Charles VI set.
[33] Except the invisible southern stars, which had to be imagined.
[34] T. Gibbon, Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean Before the Coming of the Portuguese: being a translation of Kitab al-Fawaid fi usul al-bahr wal-gawa'id of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi, London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland [Luzac & Co.], 1971 p.88. M ajid does not mean that there is no brighter star in the heavens, but none other which rises at 0 degrees celestial latitude.
[35] Depending on the painter's chief source-text; classical and more recent astronomical works, of course, reflected their own times.
[36] I do not agree with Partridge that orienis is elliptical for sol orienis in the sense he means. A reverse etymology is probably more accurate: viz, that the Latin orienis was derived through Greek [H.W]orion from an Egyptian epithet for that great East star: H r-Re-O n: the 'Surmounter of the Sun on his Mount'. N armer as O rion bears a 'rod' furnished with a mace -head - the star z [zeta] T aur i, a small but brilliant white star which marked the position of the Spring Equinox in about 4500 b.c.e. The Sceptre-Mace signified the seal and weight of authority to rule had been conferred on Egypt. H r - [Horus] - as embodied in various hieroglyphic forms - shows that the fundamental sense of this word to be 'surmounter', e.g. Hr is the face or head which surmounts the body, the falcon which surmounts the air, the king 'upon his mound' and so forth. We now see z [zeta] T aur i as the tip of 'Taurus' horn.
[37] There are other methods of pairing, such as those used in the pre-Islamic and Egyptian systems of 'hau', but one rarely finds any sign of them in western works. The 'pairings' of astrology's 12 zodiacal figures are temporal oppositions, not pairings in this sense, for the zodiac figures occur within the equatorial band, and exclude both the Poles and O rion.
[38] Both 'polar' constellations are represented in the atot series. For discussion of these stars and their importance for surveying and navigation see T aylor, E.G.R., Haven-Finding Art. The 1971 edition contains an important essay by Joseph N eeham.
[39] This habit may have led to a confusion with (or deliberate pun on) the Persian term gabr, namely Fr. guebre, which described a Zoroastrian heretic, and from whence also gaiour, a Turkish term for an infidel. Devices in the Charles V card offer a visual thesaurus of words derived from *gblgr as resort to any standard authority will show. T wo will be easily available: Davidson's Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon and Brown, D river and Briggs', Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament. Again, for Europeans, whose language of education was Latin, the word Gabbar could suggest the very mummmified form which Egyptians had sometimes seen in O rion (as M in or as Osiris). Augustine calls Egyptian mummies gAbbaras and later 'iron men' when discussing the Christian belief in resurrection. Such internal evidence suggests, to the present author, that the original source of this image, and others now included among the Charles VI card, may have been an eastern Christian church that retained (in Syriac or Coptic translation) the corpus of older Egyptian language and star-lore. It is in a Syrian Christian work that we find the more admirable character of the 'man of stone' described. See Climacus, Scala Paradisi, Step 15: "T ruly blessed is the man totally untroubled by any body, any colour or any beauty [i.e. who is as stone]... Such a man has truly mastered the fires... One man keeps this tormentor under control by struggling hard, another by being humble, another by divine revelation. T he first is like the star of morning, the second like the moon when it is full, the third like the blazing sun. And all three have their home in heaven. Light comes from the dawn and amid light the sun arises, so let all that has been said be the light in which to meditate and learn".
[40] '... hoc duce per totum decrentium siderea mundum'
[43] 'affects the world with the glance it gives, and governs with its mien'
[45] The Pharaoh as Orion, making the traverse of earth, sea and sky is seen, for example, in Pyramid Utterance 466: “You are this great star, with Orion traversing the sky; with Orion, traversing the underworld; you ascend from the east of the sky, new again in your due season. The sky has borne you with Orion; the year has put a fillet on you (the ‘head’ star) with Osiris... O king, navigate and arrive...” The English ‘with’ does not sufficiently convey the sense of one-ness in the original. The king’s waist-rope is more clearly featured in the imagery than the text of the Pyramid paintings.

[46] On the equation between stars, celestial imagery than the text of the Pyramid paintings.


[48] the Latin term ‘ludus’ did not mean a ‘game’ in the modern sense. It meant a contest of skill in any acquired learning, more like the sense in which we speak of the Olympic games, or of military exercises as ‘war-games’. For that reason Ludus described the primary school, and the primary level of schooling, the student’s valedictory dissertation and the schoolmaster’s formal dissertation. It could also apply to the child’s “practice” of horse-riding on his hobby-horse, or the contests of jousting or boardgames, but its implication was (at this stage) predominantly of exercise.


[50] For an especially interesting version see Ottens’ Atlas Maior (1729). Other figures may be depicted with a club, chiefly Bootes (whose emblem is more correctly the herder’s crook) and Hercules.


[52] The Smithsonian Globe. Illustrated in Emilie Savage-Smith: Islamicate, Fig.78, dated to the first quarter of the seventeenth century.


[54] Another Arab description of Orion.

[55] O’Donovan – The Place of the Fool

[56] Elsewhere we have discussed one of these terms, which indicates a North African and possibly Berber source. (Note 2007 – or influence of the Judeo-Arabic Lingua Franca see note above)

[57] Maior means larger/greater. The complimentary minor smaller/fewer. On the overtones and meaning of the terms arca and arcae in medieval Europe, see the extended discussion and many Index entries in Carruthers, The Book of Memory (her references to arca and arcae are too numerous to list here).

[58] The preacher of the Steele sermon shows a similar attitude to that of Jean Gerson who comments on the ‘craze’ for pictures that swept Paris during his time as Chancellor of the University.

[59] That is, the world known to the classical period.

[60] These characteristic items of short [leopard skin] cloak, curiously shaped club, string of white beads, feathers as head-ornament and pointed ‘cap’ (made of mud) are all illustrated by the plates of E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s studies, The Nuer and Nuer Religion, originally published by Oxford at the Clarendon Press in 1940 and 1946. For the ‘cap’ see Religion, Frontispiece and Plate XI; club see Nuer Plate VIII; String of ‘pearls’ see esp. Religion Plates VII and XII; cloak: Nuer Plate XXIV and Religion XIV. Nuer culture and practice provides considerable insight into the nature of early Pharaonic Egypt. N. arm’s ‘palette’ (for example) is well explained by the Nuerer’s traditional fire-shield (windshield), from which could be obtained sooty residue required to make black kohl of the simplest sort. That the Pharaohs wore black khol for war, and that the ‘palettes’ were used for mixing it, is recognised by modern archaeology. For an illustration of the Nuer windshield see Nuer Plate XV. On kohl in ancient Egypt see e.g. Emery, W.B., Archaic Egypt, Harmondsworth, Penguin (various editions) and on the black msdnt see Pyramid Texts, utterance 79. This matter links again with Orion, for another pronunciation of the word Jauza (the Arabic term for Orion) refers, as Burton tells us, to the now-extinct antelope bubalis which with its naturally ‘kohl-rimmed’ eye. A great deal more might be said on such connections between the form or details of some Atout cards and the culture of ancient Egypt but the matter is not relevant to the problems addressed in the present essay.

[71] Another Arab description of Orion.


[73] To my knowledge.

[74] We are not, here, concerned with tarrocci. The range of meaning for ‘Atout’ includes both the set of ‘trump’ cards and the suit named as ‘trumps’ for trick-taking play. This range of application shows that the word bore inferences parallel not only to the Italian term ‘trionfi’ but also to the range of meaning borne by the Arabic ‘najm’ [star’s triumph] explained below. For readers wishing to learn more about the influence that is, or was, attributed to regions within medieval Islam, the Bibliography appended may be helpful.

[75] MAior means larger/greater. The complimentary minor smaller/fewer. On the overtones and meaning of the terms arca and arcae in medieval Europe, see the extended discussion and many Index entries in Carruthers, The Book of Memory (her references to arca and arcae are too numerous to list here).

[76] The preacher of the Steele sermon shows a similar attitude to that of Jean Gerson who comments on the ‘craze’ for pictures that swept Paris during his time as Chancellor of the University.