



## AUSTRALIAN SKEPTICS

*Guide to*

# TAROT



The appeal of Tarot as a method of fortune telling seems inextricably linked to the exotic nature and large number of cards which make up the deck; they seem so ancient and unfamiliar to people used to the standard, modern, boring 53 card deck of four suits plus joker that their origins must surely be mystical.

In fact Tarot cards were originally invented for playing the forerunners of such popular modern trick-taking games as Bridge and Euchre. The word "Tarot" comes from the Italian "tarocchi" which means "trumps" or "trick-takers".

The game of "Tarot" with its 78-card deck is still played in France and French-speaking Canada. Similar decks are used by continental European card-players. The use of the tarot deck for fortune-telling is far from the "ancient art" that it is often claimed to be, dating only from the 1700s. (Despite being a simplified version of old Tarot decks, the modern deck of cards is also used for fortune telling.)

While it is true that Tarot received an inevitable part of its appeal through being banned by the Church, and hence being driven underground, this proscription now appears to be based not on the occult use of the Tarot deck, but rather as part of a general ban on gambling.

A feature of the Tarot deck is its Major Arcana ("greater secrets"), or trump cards, consisting of 21 cards without suits, such as "Death" and "The Hermit" plus a 22nd card, The Fool, which is often given the value of zero. There are also four suits, usually Swords, Wands, Cups and Pentacles, though the names of the suits vary through history and from place to place. Each suit has 14 ranked cards within it.

Despite their exotic nature, Major Arcana cards originally represented everyday scenes, or were associated with Christian religious festivals like Easter. As the alternative name of "trump" suggests, these cards originally had the power to beat "minor" cards such as the four of cups or the five of wands during play. They were dispensed with as card games became more streamlined. Once any one of the four suits could be declared "trumps" from game to game, the twenty-odd "special" cards became redundant. The Joker may be considered the solitary vestige of the Major Arcana still in use in modern trick-based games like "Five Hundred".

### References:

- A guide to Tarot card games <http://www.pagat.com/tarot/>
- Tarot and Playing Card Museum <http://trionfi.com/>
- Michael Shermer on Tarot <http://www.skeptic.com/psychic4day.html>
- The Penguin Encyclopedia of Card Games by David Parlett