

II. The Symbolism of the Tarot

The Tarot is a creation of the Italian Renaissance and evolved into its modern form throughout the 15th century. All of the images that appear on the trumps are related to the art of that century and to the century before. Like all art from this period, that of the Tarot was meant to have both body and soul—physical beauty and symbolic meaning. The Tarot, like other artworks of the Renaissance, is a product of the rebirth of ancient Classical culture that gave this period its name and, like other aspects of this reborn culture, it derives from a synthesis of art, philosophy, religion, and mysticism. Tarot images and themes are therefore best understood in relation to two mystical philosophical concepts that originated in the Classical world and influenced Medieval and Renaissance thinking: the ancient view of the cosmos and Plato's concept of the soul. Both of these concepts present a model for the mystical purification and ascent of the soul and that ascent is the message of the Tarot's allegory.

The Ancient View of the Cosmos

Of first importance to the understanding of Tarot images is the ancient view of the cosmos and its mystical significance for the individual. From the ancient world to the Renaissance, the earth was believed to be a sphere located at the unmoving center of the universe and the fixed stars, formed into constellations, were thought to revolve around the earth from east to west. Between the fixed stars and the earth, ancient astronomers placed a series of seven crystal spheres forming seven layers, each one encasing the ones below as they ascended toward the stars. On each sphere there was a planet that orbited independently from the fixed stars. When viewed with the naked eye, these are the only objects in the sky that seemed to do this. The planets were each named after a god and, by the Hellenistic period, their order was determined by the speed of each planet. From the bottom up, they were: Luna, Mercury, Venus, Sol, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. The planets were also believed to form a ladder between heaven and earth that the soul would descend at birth and, as it did so, at each planet it was given certain qualities by the god of the planet. Once the soul made it to the Earth plane, it was clothed in a body made of the four elements: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire; and subject to mortality and fate or fortune. This cosmic theme was described by Plato (429-347 BCE) in his "Myth of Er" in the last chapter of the *Republic*, commented on further by Cicero (106-43 BC) in his *De Republica*, included in *On the Daimon of Socrates*, by Plutarch (50-120), and was incorporated into the mystical worldviews of the Neoplatonists, Hermeticists, alchemists, Sufis, Kabbalists, and mystical Christians.

The seven planets of the ancients were also thought of as the soul centers of the cosmos and corresponding soul centers could be found ascending the spine, from the sacrum to the crown of the head, in the microcosm of the human body. The Neoplatonist philosopher, Iamblichus (250-325), tells us in his biography of Pythagoras (580 or 572-500 or 490 BCE) that this older mystical philosopher developed the diatonic music scale with seven notes, marked by the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet, to capture the sound that each planet made as it orbited the Earth. This harmony was called the music of the spheres. Further, Iamblichus tells us that Pythagoras used this scale in a musical treatment to bring the human soul centers into harmony with the planets. Effectively, these notes functioned like virtues meant to cure the imbalances, or vices, located in each soul center.¹⁵

Ancient mystics looked at the ladder of the planets as a two-way path. They believed that by entering a deep state of contemplation they could climb this sevenfold ladder while they were alive, let go of the seven endowments of the planets, and in this purified state enter the heaven beyond and receive a vision of their true immortal nature. This process is described in the first book of *The Corpus Hermeticum*, "The Poimanders of Hermes Trismegistus." As we can see, astrological beliefs were intimately connected with the philosophical Hermetic goal—the achievement of enlightenment—and the process involved letting go of or healing the seven vices attributed to the gods of the seven planets: Luna's force of increase and decrease, Mercury's evil cunning, Venus' lust, Sol's arrogance, Mars' audacity, Jupiter's greed, and Saturn's falsehood.¹⁶

In alchemical texts, which also looked to Hermes Trismegistus as their initial source, the seven planets were equated to a hierarchy of seven metals: lead to Saturn, iron to Mars, tin to Jupiter, copper to Venus, quicksilver to Mercury, silver to Luna, and gold to Sol. The alchemists believed that all of these metals were made of one

substance but impurities caused their diverse qualities. Lead, the most impure, fell to the bottom of the list but through alchemical processes it could be purified and transformed into the ascending purer forms of metal until it became gold, the most pure. Therefore, the alchemical quest to transmute lead to gold can be seen as a manifestation of this same mystical purification and ascent of the soul.

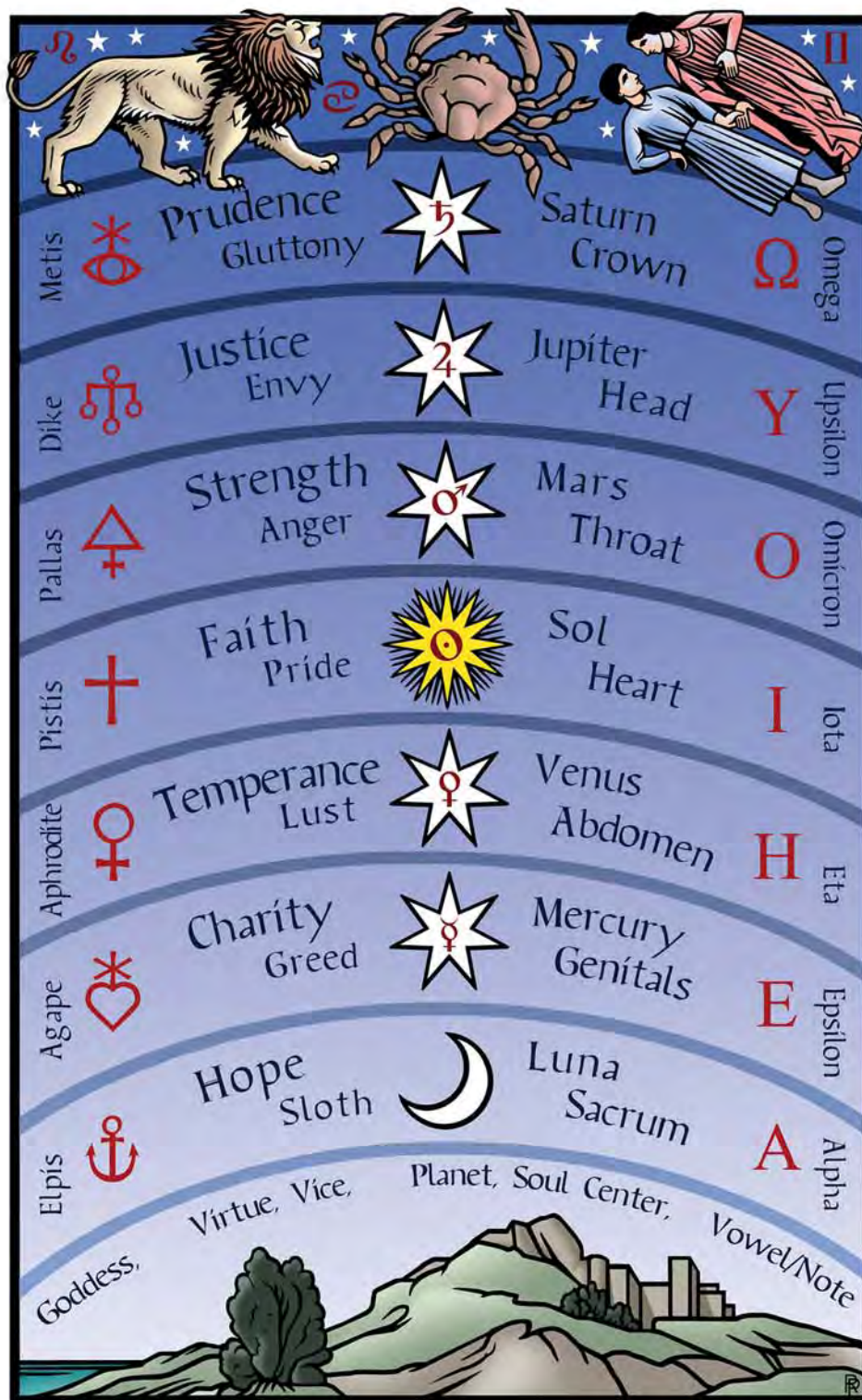


Figure 2. From Earth to Heaven, the Seven Ancient Planets as the Cosmic Soul Centers