

# MyTarot.org presents: The High priestess \ La Papesse

From the 13th Century to the Rider Waite Smith



Known as High Priestess, La Papesse, the Popess

Quick Description from:

- We see a young woman sitting on what appears to be a stone block
- Her face is calm and serene – it is hard to imagine what she is thinking.
- She is wearing a robe on which is an cross with equal arms.
- She holds a scroll which has 'Tora' written on it.
- She wears a Triple moon crown and at her feet is a similar symbol of a crescent moon.
- On either side of her is a pillar. One is white with the letter J and one is black with the letter B.
- Behind the High Priestess hangs a veil and behind the veil we see glimpses of the ocean.
- On the veil are symbols of pomegranates and palms.



## Key Words:

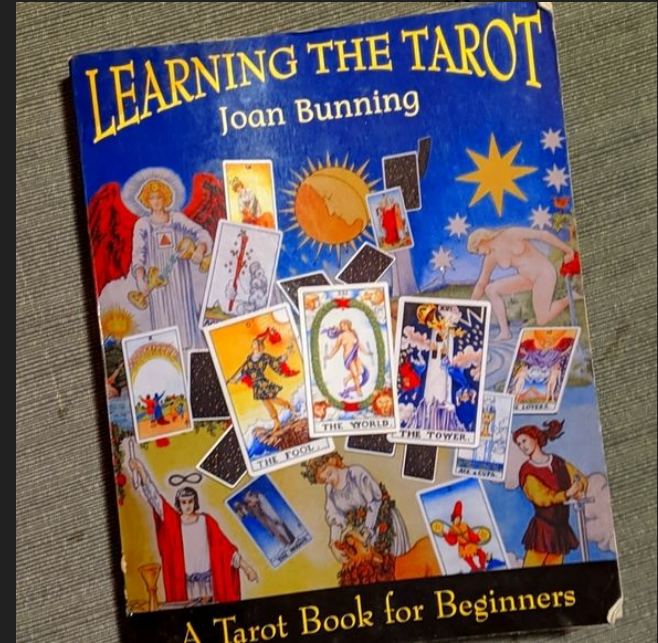
**From The Rider Waite Smith LWB:** Secrets, mystery, the future as yet revealed, the woman who interests the Querent (if male), the querent if female, silence, tenacity; wisdom, science

### Me:

Inner Knowledge, Inner truth, beyond the veil. Trusting yourself. Your subconscious

**From Joan Bunnings Learning the Tarot Pg 116:**

Non action, potential, unconscious awareness, mystery  
Discuss keywords from page 116



# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - The History

The Legend of Pope Joan c. 855 from Wikipedia:

Most versions of her story describe her as a talented and learned woman who disguised herself as a man, often at the behest of a lover. In the most common accounts, owing to her abilities she rose through the church hierarchy and was eventually elected pope. Her sex was revealed when she gave birth during a procession and she died shortly after, either through murder or of natural causes. The accounts state that later church processions avoided this spot and that the Vatican removed the female pope from its official lists and crafted a ritual to ensure that future popes were male.[5][6] In the 16th century, Siena Cathedral featured a bust of Joan among other pontiffs; this was removed after protests in 1600

Most likely untrue:

Was propagandised by the enemies of papal authority.  
Doesn't fit in with the church's documented timeline.

Bonifacio Bembo - Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards  
Italy, Milan ca. 1450-1480



# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - Pope Joan



Pope Joan giving birth during a procession; the female pope surrounded by cardinals at right, the newborn child on the ground; at left the procession and a fool standing behind a column mocking the scene; illustration to an unidentified publication. Strasbourg, 1539

# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - Pope Joan

Papesse Jeanne, 15th  
century 1849



# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - The History

## From **Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom** by Rachel Pollack:

Pope Joan was most likely a legend; the Visconti Papess was real. In the late thirteenth century an Italian group called the Guglielmites believed that their founder, Guglielma of Bohemia, who died in 1281, would rise again in 1300 and begin a new age in which women would be popes. Jumping ahead they elected a woman named Manfreda Visconti as the first papess. The Church graphically ended this heresy by burning Sister Manfreda in 1300, the year of the expected new age. Some one hundred and fifty years later the same Visconti family commissioned the first set of Tarot cards as we know them. Among these unnumbered and unnamed trumps appeared a picture of a woman later decks titled 'The Papess'.



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# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - The History

## Papesse as Mary: The Annunciation



Noblet 1659 century



Fig. 3 – London, British Library, Add. MS 49598 (936-984)



## **Papesse as Mary: The Annunciation**

Annunciation, also called Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary or Annunciation of the Lord, in Christianity, the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit to be called Jesus (Luke 1:26–38)

## Papesse as Mary: The Annunciation



Fig. 4 – Metropolitan Museum, Accession Nr. 17.190.45 (860-880)



Fig. 2 – Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, MS 469 (15th century)

Papesse as  
Mary: The  
Annunciation



IN LABIIS MEIS FERIES ET OS MEUM ANNUNCIAT

The Virgin Mary receiving the Annunciation - Hours of Henry VII (c.1500)



Bonifacio Bembo - Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards Italy, Milan ca. 1450-1480



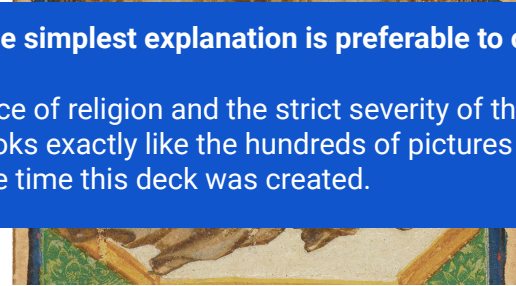
Jan van Eyck completed the Ghent Altarpiece around 1432

Papesse as  
Mary: The  
Annunciation

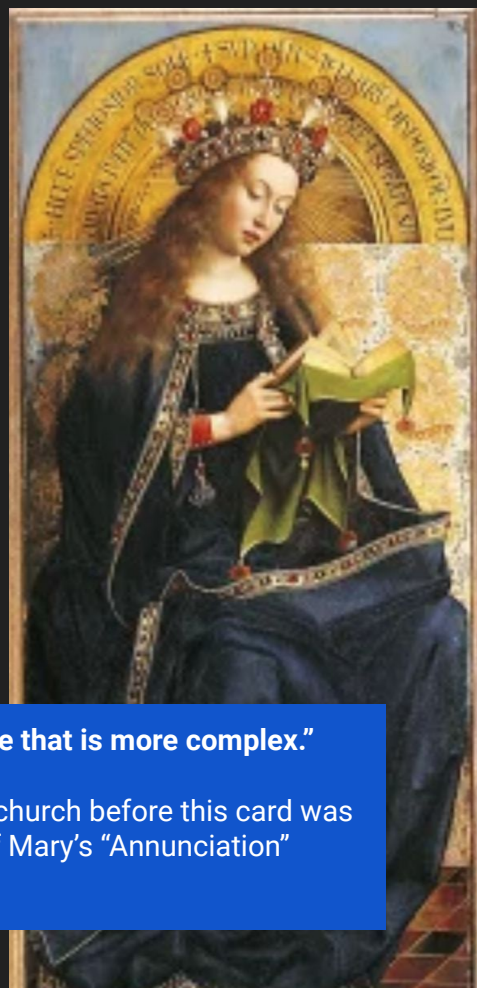


IN LABIIS MEIS PERIES ET OS MEUM ANNUNCIABIT

The Virgin Mary receiving the Annunciation - Hours of Henry VII (c.1500)



Bonifacio Bembo - Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards Italy, Milan ca. 1450-1480



Jan van Eyck completed the Ghent Altarpiece around 1432

**Occam's Razor states "The simplest explanation is preferable to one that is more complex."**

Considering the importance of religion and the strict severity of the church before this card was ever named, I believe it looks exactly like the hundreds of pictures of Mary's "Annunciation" already in existence by the time this deck was created.

# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - The History

## From *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom* by Rachel Pollack:

The Pope Joan legend and Manfreda Visconti are not simply historical curiosities. They illustrate a major social development in the Middle Ages, **the reintroduction of the female and feminine principles into religion and cosmology.** The images and the concepts associated with the masculine role had dominated both the Church and Jewish religion for centuries. As a result ordinary people experienced the religions of the priests and rabbis as remote, harsh, and unapproachable, with their emphasis on sin, judgement, and punishment. They wanted qualities of mercy and love. And they identified these with women. Like a mother shelters her child from the somewhat distant strictness of the father, a female deity supposedly would intrude for the pathetic sinners against the unremitting judgement of the Father. It is interesting to realize that in many ways the Church saw Christ, as the Son, in exactly that role of introducing love and compassion. Yet, the people demanded a female. Even the idea of the Church as 'Mother Church' did not go far enough. Finally, the Church capitulated by raising the Virgin Mary almost to the level of Christ himself. .



# MyTarot.org: La Papasses - The History

After the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Papesse and the Pope were sometimes replaced with other images in the Tarot.

For example:

The 1JJ Swiss Tarot, developed in Switzerland in the nineteenth century, they became Juno and Jupiter. Catholicism is extremely patriarchal and the idea that a woman could become pope was considered heretical.



# MyTarot.org: - The Esoteric History 1781

○ The Popess was called the High Priestess publicly for the first time in Antoine Court de Gébelin's 1781 book of pseudo-anthropology *Le Monde Primitif*. De Gébelin firmly believed that the Tarot deck is a picture book preserving ancient Egypt's most profound wisdom; therefore Christian imagery had to be a later distortion. He made it his mission to return the Tarot deck to its original Egyptian purity. De Gébelin renamed the Pope and Popess *Le Grand-Prêtre* and *La Grande-Prêtresse* (High Priest and High Priestess) and said they were a married couple, like the Egyptian religious leaders who bore those titles. His card description has the High Priestess wearing the horns of Isis, but his illustration of the card is nearly identical to the Tarot de Marseille pattern.

Link: <https://tarot-heritage.com/from-trionfi-to-majorarcana/la-papessa-la-papesse-the-popess-the-high-priestess-in-tarot/>

# MyTarot.org: - The Esoteric

**Hebrew Letter: Beth corresponds with the number 2, and astronomically with the moon.**

The Beth hieroglyph expresses the mouth of man as the organ of speech. Speech is the production of man's inner self. Therefore Beth expresses that inner self, central as a dwelling, to which one can retire without fear of disturbance. From this ideas arise of a Sanctuary, an inviolate abode for man and for God. But the Beth also expresses every production that emanates from this mysterious retreat, every internal activity, and from it issue ideas of Instruction, of the higher Knowledge, of Law, of Erudition, of occult Science or Kabbalah.

**Chokhmah, the second of the ten sefirot is the first power of conscious intellect within Creation, and the first point of 'real' existence, since Keter represents emptiness.**



## The High Priestess

The Pictorial Key by Waite

(The High Priestess) is sometimes held to represent the Divine Law and the Gnosis, in which case the Priestess corresponds to the idea of the Shekinah. She is the Secret Tradition and the higher sense of the instituted Mysteries.

Shekhinah in Kabbalah from MyJewishLearning.com

In contemporary Jewish discourse, the term shekhinah most commonly refers to the divine feminine, or to the feminine aspect of God — God as mother, nurturer, protector and compassionate one. Though the term — from the Hebrew root meaning to “dwell” — is found throughout early rabbinic literature, in its early usage it referred generally to God’s presence among the people and had no gender associations. The connection between shekhinah and femininity emerges mainly in Jewish mystical literature. The concept was later embraced by Jewish feminists as a counterbalance to prevailing masculine notions of God as king, father and judge.

Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, gives the shekhinah a distinctly female quality. One of the earliest works of Jewish mysticism, Sefer Habahir, states that when the righteous behave appropriately, “shekhinah rests among them, and through their deeds she rests in the bosom of the Holy One, and makes them fruitful and increases them.” The Zohar compares the shekhinah to a mother, sister, daughter and bride. Kabbalists also associated shekhinah with the clouds of glory, which guided the Israelites during their wandering in the desert, and the pillar of fire that warmed them at night. In this telling, the shekhinah is a protective maternal presence on the Israelites’ journey from slavery to freedom.

Link: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-divine-feminine-in-kabbalah-an-example-of-jewish-renewal/>

# MyTarot.org: - The Esoteric History

- De Mellet (1781): Pride, symbolized by her peacock. Idolatry.
- Levi (1855): The female Pope. The house of God and Man, the sanctuary, the law, gnosis, Kabbala, the occult church, the duad, wife or mother.
- Mathers (1888): The High Priestess. Science, wisdom, education.
- Golden Dawn (1896): The Priestess of the Silver Star. High Priestess. Change, increase and decrease. Fluctuation (whether for good or evil is shown by cards connected with it.)
- The High Priestess is represented by the letter Gimel from the Hebrew alphabet and it represents the Camel. The Camel carries burdens and The High Priestess due to her awareness of the unknown carries the weight of understanding and all experiences.
- Crowley (1944): The card represents the most spiritual form of Isis the Eternal Virgin; the Artemis of the Greeks. She is clothed only in the luminous veil of light. It is important for high initiation to regard Light not as the perfect manifestation of the Eternal Spirit, but rather as the veil which hides that Spirit. It does so all the more effectively because of its incomparably dazzling brilliance. Thus she is light and the body of light. She is the truth behind the veil of light. She is the soul of light. Upon her knees is the bow of Artemis, which is also a musical instrument, for she is huntress, and hunts by enchantment

— Paul Hudson - Mystical Origins of the Tarot: From Ancient Roots to Modern Usage

# MyTarot.org: - The Esoteric History

Crowley Book of Thoth says: This card is called "The High Priestess", and is attributed to the Moon. The card represents the Heavenly Isis. It is a symbol of complete spiritual purity; it is initiation in its most secret and intimate form, descending upon the human consciousness from the ultimate divine consciousness. Looked at from below, it is the pure and unwavering aspiration of the man to the Godhead, his source.

## Robert Place: Tarot History, Symbolism

The columns, from left to right, are Levi's Boaz and Jakin, the two symbolic pillars that in the account in I Kings 7:15-22 are said to have stood to the north and the south of the door of Solomon's Temple. The meaning of their names in Hebrew is uncertain but it is believed that Boaz means "in his strength" and Jakin (also spelled Joachim) means "he establishes." The pillars are important symbols in both Rosicrucian and Masonic ritual, and like the Chinese yin and yang, they represent dark and light, and feminine and masculine



# MyTarot.org: - Rider Waite Smith (RWS)

From the website Tarot for Woman by Sinead Fine:

<https://tarotforwomen.com/the-major-arcana-card-the-high-priestess/>

- **Body Posture:** The High Priestess sits with her back straight and looks forward. Her body is relaxed but aware, meditative and serene.
- **Facial Expression:** Her facial expression is calm and reflective. One can imagine asking her a question and receiving the answer simply by a look!
- **Throne:** The High Priestess sits on a (Stone block) throne which represents authority.
- **Crown on Head:** The crown on the head of The High Priestess represents the three phases of the moon: Waxing, Full and Waning moon representing the three phases in a woman's life – Maid, Mother and Crone. The Moon rules this card and so its symbolism pops up a few times in this card.
- **Tora Scroll:** The 'Tora' represents the Torah of the Jewish religion. The Torah is the name for the 5 books of the Jewish nation which contains the law and stories of the Jewish people. Jewish mysticism is otherwise known as Kabbalah and the Golden Dawn based a lot of their rituals on Kabbalistic sources. Since this Tarot deck is partly based on Kabbalah, lots of Jewish symbols abound.
- **Two Pillars:** as mentioned are Boaz and Jakin, the name of the pillars in the Temple of Solomon. The temple can also represent the Temple of Isis, an ancient Egyptian Goddess. The High Priestess sits between the two pillars demonstrating that she is in a state of equality between them.
- **Curtain / Veil:** The curtain/veil represents the thin membrane between the conscious and unconscious. On the veil are Pomegranates (fertility, sex and procreation) and Palms (phallic). When Male and Female join they are 2 becoming 1 (new life). The pomegranates are in specific positions (as if you are seeing part of 10 Sephiroth / Tree of Life ).

# MyTarot.org: - Rider Waite Smith (RWS)

- **Sea:** We can barely see the sea behind the High Priestess but it is there. The sea represents the Great Unconscious. Just like an iceberg is 9/10's under the water, so too is our unconscious. Our unconscious mind, the place of intuition, dreams, fears, shadows and healing is ruled by the Moon. The sea is where primordial life began. So too the conscious mind comes from our unconscious soup. Imagine the sea – it can be serene or it can be destructive – so too can the mind. When I think of The High Priestess I often imagine the potential of the sea and if not understood, its destructive force. To access the sea of your unconscious you must meet the High Priestess within.
- **Cross on Chest** This represents the Solar cross. The Vertical line (male) and the Horizontal line (female). 2 lines = number 2. The four arms are created which can also represent the Emperor (number 4). To become the Emperor and create stability in the external world, we must first have stability within (The High Priestess).

# MyTarot.org: - Rider Waite Smith (RWS): The Magician

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